# An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an

## Ahmad von Denffer

## Introduction

The Qur'an contains the revelations of Allah, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, to mankind. It is the message from God to man and therefore of utmost importance to us. To properly grasp a message, one needs first of all to understand its contents exactly, and for this purpose one must study the Qur'an deeply and in detail. In fact, some people do spend their whole lives studying the Qur'an, reading and reflecting upon it and, as they grow and develop, both physically and spiritually, they discover for themselves new meanings and implications.

Secondly, some special knowledge of the circumstances that surround the message is also necessary for fuller understanding of its meaning and implications. Although some part of this special knowledge can be derived from the Qur'an itself, there remain other areas of knowledge that can only be discovered by wider study and research.

Muslims have from earliest times, applied themselves not only to the message from Allah the Qur'an but also to its setting and framework, and the preoccupation with these ultimately developed into the 'sciences' of or 'knowledge' about the Qur'an, known as "*ulum al-qur'an'*.

The proper approach to the Qur'an, in my humble view, can be described in three stages. You must:

- first, *receive* the message of the Qur'an, by hearing or reading it;
- second, *understand* the message of the Qur'an by reflecting upon it and studying its meanings;
- third, *apply* the message of the Qur'an by ordering your personal life as well as the life of society according to its message.

The branch of knowledge, called '*ulum al-Qur'an* may be used as a means for the accomplishment of the second stage, understanding the message of the Qur'an, by understanding its setting and circumstances.

According to a general definition, '*ulum al-qur'an* [Sabuni, Muhammad 'Ali: al-tibyan fi 'ulum al-qur-an, Beirut, 1970, p. 10.] denotes studies concerned with the book of revelations sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad, [The customary blessings on the Prophet (Allah's blessings and peace beupon him) each time his name is mentioned will not be repeated in the text, but the reader is kindly requested to observe this Muslim tradition.] namely:

- Its revelation.
- Its collection.
- Its order and arrangement.
- Its writing down.
- Information about the reasons and occasions of revelation.
- About what was revealed in Makka and what in Madina.
- About the abrogating and abrogated verses.
- About the 'clear' and the 'unclear' verses.

The term also covers Qur'an-related studies, such as:

- The explanation of verses and passages by the Prophet himself, his Companions, their followers and the later exegetes of the Qur'an.

- The methods of explanation.
- The scholars of exegesis and their books.

The aim of this book as all 'ulum al-qur'an is to help towards a better understanding of the Qur'anic message by providing information on its setting, framework and circumstances. To a great extent it is a descriptive account of the traditional subject of 'ulum al-qur'an. Some branches of 'ulum al-qur'an, such as the divisions of the text, style, literary form etc., have only been touched upon briefly, while others that seemed more important have been dealt with in more detail. In particular such topics related to the understanding of the text (asbab al-nuzul, al-nasikh wa al-mansukh, etc.) have been treated more extensively while others, such as the 'seven ahruf' or the 'Uthmanic writing, which are of benefit only to readers with a good knowledge of classical Arabic, have been introduced, but not elaborated upon.

I have restricted myself to presenting the generally-accepted views on the issues and, where no consensus exists, have referred to the most important of the divergent opinions. Although I do have my own views on some questions, my basic aim in this 'Introduction' is generally to inform the reader about the subject, and not to guide him overtly or covertly towards my own conclusions.

There are a number of matters related to the study of the Qur'an to which I have drawn special attention since this 'Introduction' to the 'ulum al-qur'an is aimed at a special readership, namely, young educated Muslims with little or no access to the original sources on the subject. I have therefore included several topics, of special relevance for that readership, such as:

- Orientalists and the Qur'an.
- Translations of the Qur'an.
- Modern interpretation of the Qur'an.
- Language of the Qur'an.
- Reading and recitation of the Qur'an.

Again, particularly for the benefit of these readers, I have often quoted typical examples to illustrate the various points discussed and make them more easily comprehensible.

Finally, to assist readers not familiar with Arabic, I have supplied references to English translations, where available (such as translation of hadith books, etc.). However, on certain topics (e.g. asbab al-nuzul or al-nasikh wa al-mansukh) there is no literature available as yet in English and references had to be restricted to Arabic sources only.

I have also attempted to note in the bibliography at least one or two books in English for each section, from which more insight may be gained on the topic discussed.

May this volume (to the best of my knowledge, the first of its kind in a European language) fulfil its purpose and assist you to grasp fully the message of the Qur'an and to apply it in your life, and may Allah accept this humble effort and forgive its shortcomings.

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# CHAPTER 1: The Qur'an and Revelation

## REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE BEFORE THE QUR'AN

God's Communication with Man

God communicated with man. This is the key concept of revelation upon which all religious belief if more than a mere philosophical attempt to explain man's relationship with the great 'unknown', the 'wholly other' is founded. There is no religious belief, however remote it may be in time or concept from the clear teachings of Islam, which can do without or has attempted to do without God's communication with man.

Man denies God

God's communication with man has always accompanied him, from the earliest period of his appearance on this planet, and throughout the ages until today. Men have often denied the communication from God or attributed it to something other than its true source and origin. More recently some have begun to deny God altogether, or to explain away man's preoccupation with God and the communication from Him as a preoccupation with delusion and fantasy. Yet even such people do not doubt that the preoccupation of man with God's communication is as old as man himself. Their reasoning is, they claim, based on material evidence. Following this line of thought they feel that they should deny God's existence, but are at the same time compelled to concede the point for material evidence is abundant that man has ever been preoccupied with thinking about God and the concept of God's communication with man. Empiricism and Realism.

Their general approach to emphasize material evidence in the search for reality and truth, is surely commendable. Not only empiricist philosophy but also commonsense tell us that one should accept as real and existent what can be grasped empirically, that is, by direct experience, by seeing, hearing, touching and so on. While there may be in other systems of thought, other criteria for the evaluation of reality, at present it is a materialistic philosophy that rules the day, and though many people (especially the 'religious' type) are saddened by this and wish back the 'old days of idealism and rule of the creed', I personally think that we have to accept the present state of affairs not as ideal and unchangeable, but as our point of departure and moreover that doing so is of some advantage to us.

Creation is Material Evidence for God

Many now accept empiricism as their guiding principles and God gives ample evidence, material evidence, capable of verification by all empiricists, for His being and existence. The wide earth, the whole universe of creation, are evidence, material evidence, for God. No empiricist would deny that the earth and the universe do exist. It is only that he does not always perceive them as 'creation', for then he would have to argue from the material evidence that he has to a mighty and puissant cause, to reason and purpose behind it. Such an argument would by no means be in contradiction with his empiricist, rational and scientific line of thought, rather in perfect agreement with it.

Man's Pride

I do not wish to discuss here in any detail why then, despite this, man denies God and disregards His communication with man. Suffice to say that the cause must be seen in man's self-perception, his arrogance and false pride. Having discovered that he and his kind constitute the peak of 'creation', he thinks himself autonomous, self-dependent, absolutely free and fully equipped to be master of the universe. Somehow, this self-perception too has been with man from his early days. He has always thought himself better than anything else. [The question of how evil came into the world has preoccupied many sincere seekers after the truth. The answer which the Qur'an gives is simple yet convincing if seen against all the evidence of historical and contemporary human civilization. At the root of all evil in this world is disobedience to God, resulting from the belief that one is superior to another. From this belief stems oppression of man by man discrimination, crime and all other evils that rule the day. The test lies in obedience to God, for seen against God, the 'wholly other', all creation is indeed on the other side and equal. In Sura al-A'raf (7) it is related that God asked all angels to bow before Adam, the first man. The angels obeyed, and observed God's will, except Iblis. When asked why he opposed God's will, he replied: 'ana khairun minhu' **I (Iblis) am better than him (Adam), you created me from fire and created him from clay**' (Al-Qur'an 7:12) . This then is the beginning of all evil, for it is Iblis who after this makes it his mission to incite men also to act against God's will.]

Guidance for Man

Muslims, referring to the Holy Qur'an, also conclude that from the beginning of his life on earth, man has received communication from God, to guide him and protect him from such self-perception and deceit:

> **'We said: Get ye down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me,**

**whosoever follows My guidance on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve'** (Al-Qur'an 2:38)

[I shall use the following two English translations of the Holy Qur'an: A. Yusuf Ali, (Ali, Abdullah Yusuf: The Glorious Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary. Leicester, 1978) and M. Pickthall (Pickthall, Mohammad Marmaduke: The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, New York, 1963).]

This message and promise has been communicated by God to all mankind, all children of Adam, as the Qur'an explains:

**'O ye children of Adam! Whenever there come to you apostles from amongst you, rehearsing My signs unto you those who are righteous and mend (their lives) on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve'** (Al-Qur'an 7:35).

The Messengers

The guidance from God comes through the apostles or messengers, and they bringwith them the scripture from God:

**'We sent before time Our apostles with clear signs and sent down with them the book and the balance (of right and wrong) that men may stand forth in justice ...'** (Al-Qur'an 57:25).

The basic message of all prophets from God, and hence of all scriptures they brought, is one and the same message from God to man:'

**'And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming): Serve Allah and shun false gods ...'** (Al-Qur'an 16:36).

The Names of the Prophets and their Number

The Qur'an mentions the following prophets by name: Adam, Nuh, Ibrahim, Isma'il, Ishaq, Lut, Ya'qub, Yusuf, Musa, Harun, Dawud, Sulaiman, Ilyas, Al-Yasa', Yunus, Ayyub, Zakariya, Yahya, 'Isa, Idris, Hud, Dhul Kifl, Shu'aib, Salih, Luqmaan, Dhul Qarnain, 'Uzair, Muhammad.

This does not mean, however, that only these have been God's prophets. Indeed the Qur'an is very clear that the number of prophets is much larger and that to each community from among mankind God has sent His messenger:

**'We did aforetime send apostles before thee: of them there are some whose story We have related to thee and some whose story We have not related to thee ...'** (Al-Qur'an 40:78).

**'To every people (was sent) an apostle ...'** (Al-Qur'an 10: 47).

The Names of the Scriptures and their Number

Just as there have been numerous prophets so there were numerous written records of their messages. The Qur'an mentions the following revelations in particular, which are sometimes called sheets or leaves (Suhuf) and sometimes book or scripture (Kitab):

The 'sheets' of Ibrahim and Musa. The Torah (Taurat) of Musa. The Psalms (Zabur) of Dawud. The Gospel (Injil) of 'Isa. The Qur'an of Muhammad.

The Contents of the Former Scriptures

All the teachings contained in the former Scriptures that were meant to be of lasting value and importance are included in the Qur'an. The Qur'an also gives some specific accounts, although selective, of what the pre-Qur'anic scriptures contained and it is worthwhile to look briefly at this material:

A reference to the 'sheets' (Suhuf) of Ibrahim and Musa:

**'But those will prosper who purify themselves, and glorify the name of their guardian Lord, and (lift their hearts) in prayer. Nay, behold, ye prefer the life of this world; but the Hereafter is better and more enduring'** (Al-Qur'an 87: 14-17).

[Some say that the whole of Sura 87 is a reference to this first book of revelation, but others hold that only the few verses quoted here are actually meant. See mukhtasar tafsir Ibn Kathir, Beirut, 1402/1981,

Vol. 3, p. 631. Another reference to the Suhuf of Musa and Ibrahim is in Sura 53:36.]

A reference to the Torah (Taurat) of Musa:

> **'It was We who revealed the law (to Moses): therein was guidance and light ... We ordained therein for them: life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth and wounds equal for equal, but if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity it is an act of atonement for himself and if any fail to judge by (the light of) what God has revealed they are (no better than) wrongdoers'** (Al-Qur'an 5: 47-8).

A reference to the Psalms (Zabur) of Dawud:

> **'And verily We have written in the Psalms, after the Reminder: My righteous slaves will inherit the earth'** (Al-Qur'an 21: 105).

A reference to the Gospel (Injil) of 'Isa:

> **'Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. And those with him are hard against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves. Thou (O Muhammad) seest them bowing and falling prostrate (in worship) seeking bounty from Allah and (His) acceptance. The mark of them is on their foreheads from the traces of prostration. Such is their likeness in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel like as sown corn that sendeth forth its shoot and strengtheneth it and riseth firm upon its stalk, delighting the sowers that He may enrage the disbelievers with (the sight of) them. Allah has promised, unto such of them as believe and do good works, forgiveness and immense reward'** (Al-Qur'an 48: 29).

The pre-Qur'anic scriptures, besides carrying the same basic message about Allah, the Master of the worlds, and man, His creation, also brought specific instructions addressed directly to particular communities of people at given points of time in history and in particular circumstances, such as the Jewish or Christian communities. Revelation before the Qur'an, and hence scriptures before it, were in many of their details situation-oriented in nature and therefore confined to their particular frameworks. This also explains the continuity of revelation. With changing circumstances and in different situations new guidance from Allah was required. As long as the revelation and scripture were not completely universal in nature, revelation would not reach its finality.

<u>The Final Revelation</u>

Muhammad was the last messenger from Allah to mankind, and he brought the final revelation from God to man. Therefore the scripture containing this revelation is the last of the Holy Scriptures.

The basic message of the Holy Qur'an is the same as the basic message of the previous revelations and books, and the directives and instructions, by which it provides guidance for man are of a universal nature. They apply for all times to come and in all situations. This revelation corresponds to man's position on earth and in history. Man has reached, in his development, the stage when universal principles need to be applied to safeguard his purposeful existence.

**THE QUR'AN, HADITH AND HADITH QUDSI**

<u>The Qur'an</u>

The Qur'an can be defined as follows:

The speech of Allah, sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad, through the Angel Gabriel, in its precise meaning and precise wording, transmitted to us by numerous persons (tawatur), both verbally and in writing.

<u>The word Qur'an</u>

The Arabic word 'qur'an' is derived from the root qara'a, which has various meanings, such as to read, [Sura 17: 93.] to recite, [Sura 75:18:17: 46.] etc. Qur'an is a verbal noun and hence means the 'reading' or 'recitation'. As used in the Qur'an itself, the word refers to the revelation from Allah in the broad sense [Sura 17: 82.] and is not always restricted to the written form in the shape of a book, as we have it before us today.

However, it means revelation to Muhammad only, while revelation to other prophets has been referred to by different names (e.g. taurat, Injil, kitab, etc.).

Other Names of the Qur'an

The revelation from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad is referred to in the Qur'an itself by the name qur'an (recitation) as well as by other names, such as e.g.

- Furqaan (criterion, see 25: 1).
- Tanzil (sent down, see 26: 192).
- Dhikr (reminder, see 15: 9).
- Kitab (scripture, see 21:10).

Other references to the Qur'an are by such words as Nur (light), Huda (guidance), Rahma (mercy), Majid (glorious), Mubarak (blessed), Bashir (announcer), Nadhir (warner), etc.

All these names reflect one of the various aspects of the revealed word of Allah.

The Meaning of hadith

[For details on hadith see: A'zami, Muhammad Mustafa: Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature, Indianapolis, 1977.]

The word hadith means news, report or narration. It is in this general sense that the word is used in the Qur'an. [e.g. Sura 12:101.] Technically, the word hadith, (pl. ahadith) means in particular the reports (verbal and written) about the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. Hadith reports about the Prophet Muhammad are of the following kinds:

- What he said (qaul).
- What he did (fi'l).
- What he (silently) approved (taqrir) in others' actions.

There are also reports about him, i.e. about what he was like (*sifa*).

The difference between the Qur'an and Hadith.

There is agreement among most Muslim scholars that the contents of the sunna are also from Allah. Hence they have described it as also being the result of some form of inspiration. [For details see kitab al-risala, by Imam al-Shafi'i, Cairo, n.d., especially pp. 28-9. In English: Khadduri Majid, Islamic Jurisprudence. Shafi'i's Risala, Baltimore, 1961, chapter 5, especially pp. 121-2.] The contents of the sunna are however expressed through the Prophet's own words or actions, while in the case of the Qur'an the Angel Gabriel brought the exact wording and contents to the Prophet, who received this as revelation and then announced it, in the very same manner that he received it.

The difference between these two forms has been illustrated by Suyuti (following Juwaini) in the following manner:

> 'The revealed speech of Allah is of two kinds: As to the first kind, Allah says to Gabriel: Tell the Prophet to whom I sent you that Allah tells him to do this and this, and He ordered him something. So Gabriel understood what His Lord had told him. Then he descended with this to the Prophet and told him what His Lord had told him, but the expression is not this (same) expression, just as a king says to someone upon whom he relies: Tell so-and-so: The king says to you: strive in his service and gather your army for fighting ... and when the messenger (goes and) says: The king tells you: do not fail in my service, and do not let the army break up, and call for fighting, etc., then he has not lied nor shortened (the message) ...
>
> 'And as to the other kind, Allah says to Gabriel: Read to the Prophet this (piece of) writing, and Gabriel descended with it from Allah, without altering it the least, just as (if) the king writes a written (instruction) and hands it over to his trustworthy (servant) and says (to him): Read it to so-and-so. Suyuti said: The Qur'an belongs to the second kind, and the first kind is the Sunna, and from this derives the reporting of the Sunna according to the meaning unlike the Qur'an." [Sabuni, tibyan, p.52]

It is generally accepted that the difference between Qur'an and sunna is as follows:

The *ahadith* from or about the Prophet Muhammad are:

- The words or actions of a human being, and not the speech of God as the Qur'an is.
- Not necessarily reported in their precise wording, as the Qur'an is.
- Not necessarily transmitted by tawatur, except in some instances.

Hadith Qudsi

[For an introduction to the subject and select sample texts, see e.g. Ibrahim Izzuddin and Denis Johnson-Davies: Forty Hadith Qudsi, Beirut, Damascus, 1980.]

Qudsi means holy, or pure. There are some reports from the Prophet Muhammad where he relates to the people what God has said (says) or did (does), but this information is not part of the Qur'an. Such a report is called hadith qudsi, e.g.:

Abu Hurairah reported that Allah's messenger said:

> 'Allah, Mighty and Exalted is He, said: If My servant likes to meet me, I like to meet him, and if he dislikes to meet Me, I dislike to meet him.' [Forty Hadith Qudsi, Beirut, Damascus, 1980, No. 30.]

While the common factor between hadith qudsi and the Qur'an is that both contain words from Allah which have been revealed to Muhammad, the main points of difference between Qur'an and hadith qudsi are as follows:

In the Qur'an the precise wording is from Allah, while in the hadith qudsi the wording is given by the Prophet Muhammad.

- The Qur'an has been brought to Muhammad only by the Angel Gabriel, while hadith qudsi may also have been inspired otherwise, such as e.g. in a dream.
- The Qur'an is inimitable and unique, but not so the hadith qudsi.
- The Qur'an has been transmitted by numerous persons, (tawatur) but the hadith and hadith qudsi often only by a few or even one individual. There are hadith qudsi which are sahth, but also others hasan, or even da'if, while there is no doubt at all about any aya from the Qur'an.

Another point is that a hadith qudsi cannot be recited in prayer.

Distinctive Features of the Qur'an

The most important distinction between the Qur'an and all other words or writings therefore is that the Qur'an is the speech from Allah, revealed in its precise meaning and wording through the Angel Gabriel, transmitted by many, inimitable, unique and protected by Allah Himself against any corruption.

**REVELATION AND HOW IT CAME TO THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD**

God guides His Creation God guides His Creation

Allah the Creator has not only brought about the creation, but continues to sustain and direct it, in the way that He has created us and all that is around us. He has provided many forms of guidance, indeed, a system of guiding principles, of which the laws of 'nature' are a part.

But Allah has also granted a special form of guidance for mankind from the outset of its occupancy of the earth. He promised to Adam and his descendants: **'Get ye down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me, whosoever follows guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve'** (2: 38).' [The word here used for guidance is hudan.] This guidance comes through the prophets, whom Allah continuously sent to mankind, until the last messenger, Muhammad received His final guidance.

Guidance through Revelation

We call a man to whom God in his own way communicates His guidance, a prophet or messenger (nabi, rasul). Prophets receive the word of God through revelation and then communicate it to their fellow human beings:

**'We have sent thee INSPIRATION, as We sent it to Noah and the messengers after him: We sent INSPIRATION to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Harun and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some apostles, We have already told the story, of others We have not and to Moses God spoke direct apostles who gave good news as well as warning, that mankind after (the coming) of the apostles should have no plea against God: for God is exalted in power and ways'** (4: 163-5).

The two words italicized (capitalized) in the above translation are both derived from the Arabic root 'wahy'.

The Meaning of Wahy

The word awha, from which 'wahy' (revelation) is derived, occurs in a number of shades of meaning in the Qur'an, each of them indicating the main underlying idea of inspiration directing or guiding someone. In each example below, the italicised words in the translation are forms of the root word wahy in the original text of the Qur'an:

- Guidance in natural intuition:
  **'so we sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses . . .'** (28: 7)

- Guidance in natural instinct:
  **'and thy Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees and in (man's) habitations'** (16: 68)

- Guidance by signs:
  **'So Zakaria came out to his people from his chamber: he told them by signs to celebrate God's praises in the morning and in the evening'** (19: 11)

- Guidance from evil:
  **'Likewise did we make for every messenger an enemy evil ones among men and jinns, inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception ...'** (6: 112)

- Guidance from God:
  **'Remember thy Lord inspired the angels (with the message) ...'** (8: 12)

Means of Revelation

Wahy in the sense of 'revelation' is guidance from God for His creation, brought by the Prophets, who received the word from God through one of the means mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse:

**'It is not fitting for a man that God should speak to him except by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by sending of a messenger to reveal with God's permission what God wills: for He is Most High, Most Wise'** (42: 51)

Means of revelation are:

- Inspiration, e.g. in a dream (see 37:102, where it is related that Ibrahim receives guidance in a vision, while asleep, to sacrifice his son).

- Speech hidden away (see 27:8, where it is related that God spoke to Musa from the fire).

- Words (speech) sent through a special messenger from God (see 2:97, where it is related that God sent the Angel Gabriel as the messenger to Muhammad to reveal His message).

The Qur'an revealed to Muhammad

Prophet Muhammad, the last of God's messengers, received the revelation of the Qur'an through a special messenger sent by God for this purpose: the Angel Gabriel, who recited to him God's words exactly.

The Descent of the Qur'an

According to Suyuti' [al Itqan fi ulum al quran, Beirut, 1973, Vol. I pp. 39-40] on the basis of three reports from 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas, in Hakim, Baihaqi and Nasa'i, the Qur'an descended in two stages:

- From the lauh al-mahfuz, the 'well-preserved tablet', to the lowest of the heavens (bait al-'izza) of the world, all together, in the laila al-qadr.

- From the heavens to earth in stages throughout the twenty-three years of Muhammad's Prophethood, and first in the laila al-qadr of Ramadan, through the Angel Gabriel.

This second descent from the heaven to the heart of the Prophet is referred to in Sura al-isra' (17) and Sura al-furqan (25).

**BEGINNING OF THE REVELATION**

The revelation of the Qur'an began in the laila al-qadr of Ramadan (the 27th night or one of the odd nights after the 21st) after the Prophet Muhammad had passed the fortieth year of his life (that is around the year 610), during his seclusion in the cave of Hira' on a mountain near Makka.

Bukhari's Account

[English translations of ahadith are, unless otherwise indicated, from Khan, Muhammad Muhsin: The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari, 9 vols., Istanbul, 1978 (abbr. as Bukhari) and Siddiqui, Abdul Hamid: Sahih Muslim, 4 vols., Lahore, 1978 (abbr. as Muslim).]

This is the account, as reported in the Sahih of Bukhari:

> Narrated Aisha the mother of the faithful believers: The commencement of the divine inspiration to Allah's apostle was in the form of good dreams which came like bright daylight (i.e. true) and then the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him.
>
> He used to go in seclusion in the Cave of Hira', where he used to worship (Allah alone) continuously for many days before his desire to see his family. He used to take with him food for the stay and then come back to (his wife) Khadija to take his food likewise again, till suddenly the truth descended upon him while he was in the Cave of Hira'.
>
> The angel came to him and asked him to read. The Prophet replied 'I do not know how to read'. The Prophet added, 'The angel caught me (forcibly) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read and I replied, "I do not know how to read". Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read, but again I replied, "I do not know how to read" (or what shall I read?). Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me, and then released me and said: "Read, in the name of Your Lord, who created, created man from a clot. Read! And Your Lord is the most bountiful" ... [Bukhari, I, No. 3; VI, No. 478; Muslim I, No. 301.]

The narration goes on to tell us that the Prophet went back to his wife Khadija and recounted to her his dreadful experience. She comforted him and both of them consulted Waraqa, Khadlja's relative and a learned Christian, about it. Waraqa told Muhammad that he had encountered the one 'whom Allah had sent to Moses' and that he would be driven out by his people.

How Revelation came

> Narrated Aisha, the mother of the faithful believers: Al-Harith bin Hisham asked Allah's apostle: 'O Allah's apostle. How is the divine inspiration revealed to you?' Allah's apostle replied, 'Sometimes it is "revealed" like the ringing of a bell, this form of inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says'. [Bukhari, I, No. 2.]

The First Revelation' [See Suyuti, Itqan, I, pp.23-4.]

The first revelation that the Prophet Muhammad received is in the first verses from Sura al-'alaq (96:1-3, according to others 1-5):

> **'Read in the name of your Lord, who created, created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is most bountiful. (He who taught) the use of the pen taught man which he knew not.'**

The remainder of Sura 96, which now has 19 ayat, was revealed on some later occasion.

The Pause (fatra)

After the first message thus received, revelation ceased for a certain period (called fatra) and then resumed:

> Narrated Jabir bin 'Abdullah Al-Ansari while talking about the period of pause in revelation reporting the speech of the Prophet, 'While I was walking, all of a sudden I heard a voice from the heaven. I looked up and saw the same angel who had visited me at the Cave of Hira' sitting on a chair between the sky and the earth. I got afraid of him and came back home and said "Wrap me (in blankets)" and then Allah revealed the following holy verses (of the Qur'an): O you covered in your cloak, arise and warn (the people against Allah's punishment) ... up to "and all pollution shun".'

After this revelation came strongly and regularly. [Bukhari, I, end of No. 3.]

The Second Revelation

The second portion of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad was the beginning of Sura al-muddaththir (74: 15). It now consists of 56 verses, the rest revealed later, and begins as follows: 'O you, covered in your cloak, arise and warn, thy Lord magnify, thy raiment purify, pollution shun ...'

Other Early Revelations

Many hold that Sura al-muzzammil (73) was the next revelation.

According to others, Sura al-fatiha (1) was the third sura to be revealed. [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p.24.]

Among other early revelations, which the Prophet declared in Makka, are, according to some reports, Sura 111, Sura 81, Sura 87, Sura 92, Sura 89, etc. Then revelation continued, 'mentioning Paradise and Hell, and until mankind turned to Islam, then came revelation about halal and haram ... ' [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p.24.]

Revelation came to the Prophet throughout his lifetime, both in Makka and Madina, i.e. over a period of approximately 23 years, until shortly before his death in the year 10 after Hijra (632).

The Last Revelation

Many Muslim scholars agree that the last revelation was Sura 2, verse 281:

> **'And fear the day when ye shall be brought back to God. Then shall every soul be paid what it earned and none shall be dealt with unjustly.'**

Some also say that it was 2:282 or 2:278. [Kamal, Ahmad 'Adil: 'ulum al-Qur'an, Cairo, 1974, p.18.]

It has also been suggested that all three verses were revealed on one occasion. The Prophet died nine nights after the last revelation.

Others hold that Sura 5:4 was the last to be revealed:

> **'This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.'**

The opinion that this verse was the last revelation is not sound according to many scholars, since it was revealed during the last pilgrimage of the Prophet. This information is based upon a hadith from 'Umar. Suyuti explains concerning the verse in Sura 5 that after it nothing concerning ahkam and hal'al and haram was revealed, and in this sense it is the 'completion' of religion. However, revelation reminding man of the coming day of judgement continued and the last such revelation is the above verse. [Sabuni, tibyan pp. 18-9]

Reasons why the Qur'an was sent down in Stages

The Qur'an was revealed in stages over a period of 23 years, and not as a complete book in one single act of revelation. There are a number of reasons for this; most important are the following:

- To strengthen the heart of the Prophet by addressing him continuously and whenever the need for

guidance arose.

- Out of consideration for the Prophet since revelation was a very difficult experience for him.
- To gradually implement the laws of God.
- To make understanding, application and memorization of the revelation easier for the believers.

## CHAPTER 2 : Transmission of the Qur'anic Revelation

The revelation contained in the Qur'an has been transmitted to us by numerous persons in two ways: orally and in written form.

### MEMORISATION AND ORAL TRANSMISSION

Memorization by the Prophet

Oral transmission of the revelation was based on hifz or memorization and the Prophet Muhammad himself was the first to commit a revelation to memory after the Angel Gabriel had brought it to him:

> **'Move not thy tongue concerning the (Qur'an) to make haste therewith. It is for Us to collect it and promulgate it; but when We have promulgated it, follow thou its recital'** (75: 16-19)
>
> **'... an apostle from God, rehearsing scriptures, kept pure and holy ...'** (98: 2)

Memorisation by the Companions

The Prophet then declared the revelation and instructed his Companions to memorise it. The case of Ibn Mas'ud, who was the first man to publicly recite the Qur'an in Makka, shows that even in the very early phase of the Islamic umma recital of the revelation from memory was practised by the Companions:

> '... the first man to speak the Qur'an loudly in Makka after the apostle was 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud. The Prophet's Companions came together and mentioned that the Quraish had never heard the Qur'an distinctly read to them ... When (Ibn Mas'ud) arrived at the maqam, he read "**In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful**", raising his voice as he did so. "**The Compassionate who taught the Qur'an ...**" (55:1) ... They got up and began to hit him in the face; but he continued to read so far as God willed that he should read ... [Guillaume, E.: The Life of Muhammad (abbr. as Ibn Hisham), London, 55, pp. 141-2; Ibn Hisham: Sira al-nabi, Cairo, n.d., 1, p.206.]

It is also reported that Abu Bakr used to recite the Qur'an publicly in front of his house in Makka. [Sira Ibn Hisham, The Life of Muhammad]

The Prophet encourages Memorisation

There are numerous ahadith, giving account of various efforts made and measures taken by the Prophet to ensure that the revelation was preserved in the memory of his Com- panions. The following is perhaps the most clear:

> 'Narrated 'Uthman bin 'Affan: The Prophet said: "The most superior among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it".' [Bukhari, VI, No. 546.]

It is also well known that the recital of the Qur'an during the daily prayers is required and hence many Companions heard repeatedly passages from the revelation, memorized them and used them in prayer.

The Prophet also listened to the recitation of the Qur'an by the Companions.

> Narrated 'Abdullah (b. Mas'ud): 'Allah's Apostle said to me: "Recite (of the Qur'an) for me". I said: "Shall I recite it to you although it had been revealed to you?!" He said: "I like to hear (the Qur'an) from others". So I recited Surat-an-Nisa' till I reached: "**How (will it be) then when We bring from each nation a witness and We bring you (O Muhammad) as a witness against these people?**" ' (4: 41). 'Then he said: "Stop!" Behold, his eyes were shedding tears then.' [Bukhari, VI, No. 106.]

The Prophet sent Teachers

The Prophet sent teachers to communities in other places so that they might receive instruction in Islam and the Qur'an.

The case of Mus'ab bin 'Umair illustrates that this was so even before the hijra:

> 'When these men (of the first pledge of 'Aqaba) left (for Madina) the apostle sent with them Mus'ab bin 'Umair ... and instructed him to read the Qur'an to them and to teach them Islam and to give them instruction about religion. In Madina Musiab was called "the reader".' [Ibn Hisham, p. 199.]

Another well-known case concerns Mu'adh bin Jabal who was sent to Yemen to instruct the people there.

Qur'an Readers among the Companions

Suyuti [Itqan 1, p. 124.] mentions more than twenty well-known persons who memorized the revelation, among them were Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Huraira, 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas, 'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin al-'As, 'A'isha, Hafsa, and Umm Salama.

From among these, the Prophet himself recommended especially the following:

> 'Narrated Masruq: 'Abdullah bin 'Amr mentioned 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud and said: I shall ever love that man for I heard the Prophet saying: Take (learn) the Qur'an from four: 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Salim, Muiadh and Ubay bin Ka'b'. [Bukhari, VI, No. 521.]

Another hadith informs us about those Companions who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety and gone over it with the Prophet before his death:

> 'Narrated Qatada: I asked Anas bin Malik: Who collected the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet? He replied, Four, all of whom were from the Ansar: Ubay bin Ka'b, Mu'adh bin Jabal, Zaid bin Thabit and Aba Zaid.' [Bukhari, VI, No. 525.]

The fact that some of the earliest historical reports make special mention in the accounts of the battles that were fought, of Muslims killed who knew (something of) the Qur'an by heart, gives a clear indication that memorization of the revelation was considered important and widely practised from the earliest times. [See below, on collection of the Qur'an in Abu Bakr's time.]

The Qur'an Memorized in the Prophet's Lifetime

It is therefore certain that the Qur'an had been memorized by the Companions of the Prophet during his lifetime. This tradition continued among the Companions after the Prophet's death and, later, among the tabi'un and all generations of Muslims that have followed, until today.

**TRANSMISSION OF THE WRITTEN TEXT**

The Written Text at the Time of the Prophet Muhammad

What is meant by Jam' al-Qur'an?

The general meaning of jam' al-qur'an is to 'bring together the Qur'an'. This was done and has to be understood in two ways:

- Bringing together the Qur'an orally, or in one's mind (hifz).
- Bringing together the Qur'an in written form, or on sheets, or in a book.

Jam' al-qura'n therefore, in the classical literature, has various meanings:

- To learn the Qur'an by heart.
- To write down every revelation.
- To bring together those materials upon which the Qur'an has been written.
- To bring together the reports of people who have memorized the Qur'an.
- To bring together all such sources, both oral and written.

How was the Qur'an Collected?

In Suyuti's Itqan it is said that the Qur'an had been written down in its entirety in the time of the Prophet but had not been brought together in one single place, and that therefore these written records or documents had not been arranged in order.' [Itqan, I, p. 41]

However, this statement does not preclude that the ordering of the Qur'an and the arrangement of the suras, was fixed by the Prophet himself and safeguarded through oral transmission.

Stages of Collection

As far as the written text is concerned, one may distinguish three stages:

- In the time of the Prophet:
- in the hearts of men (memorization).
- on writing materials
- In the time of Abu Bakr.
- In the time of 'Uthman.

Why was no Book left by the Prophet?

The Prophet Muhammad did not present to his Companions the revelation collected and arranged in a single written volume. There are a number of good reasons for this:

- Because the revelation did not come down in one piece, but at intervals and was received continuously until the end of the Prophet's life.
- Because some verses were abrogated in the course of revelation, and therefore flexibility needed to be maintained.
- The ayat and suras were not always revealed in their final order, but were arranged later.
- The Prophet lived only nine days after the last revelation and was severely ill.
- There was no dispute or friction about the Qur'an during the time of the Prophet, as developed afterwards when he, as the final authority, was no longer available.

Writing down the Revelation

While writing was not widespread among the people in Arabia at the time of the Prophet there were persons of whom it is reported that they did write. It is said for example of Waraqa, Khadija's cousin, that he had been converted to Christianity in the pre-Islamic period 'and used to write Arabic and write of the Gospel in Arabic as much as Allah wished him to write'. [Bukhari. VI. No. 478.]

The Prophet himself did much to encourage the Muslims to learn to write. It is related that some of the Quraish, who were taken prisoners at the battle of Badr, regained their freedom after they had taught some of the Muslims the art of writing.' [Tabaqat Ibn Sa'd, II(2), p. 19]

Did the Prophet himself write?

Although it is not clear whether the Prophet Muhammad knew how to write, there is unanimous agreement among scholars that Muhammad himself did not write down the revelation. The Qur'an clearly states:

> **'And thou (O Muhammad) wast not a reader of any scripture before it, nor didst thou write it with thy right hand, for then might those have doubted who follow falsehood'** (29:48)

The Qur'an also refers to Muhammad on several occasions as the 'unlettered prophet' which some scholars have interpreted in the sense that he did not read or write:

> **'Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered prophet ...'** (8: 157)

His community too has been described as 'unlettered':

> **'It is he who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves ...'** (62:2)

The Qur'an written during the Prophet's Lifetime

There is no doubt that the Qur'an was not only transmitted orally by many Muslims who had learned parts or the whole of it, but that it was also written down during the lifetime of the Prophet.

The well-known report about 'Umar's conversion shows that large passages of the revelation had already been written down even at a very early time, in Makka, long before the hijra, when the Prophet was still in the house of Arqam.

> 'Umar had set out to kill the Prophet Muhammad, when somebody informed him that Islam had already spread into his own family and pointed out to him that his brother-in-law, his nephew and his sister had all become Muslims. 'Umar went to the house of his sister and found her together with her husband and another Muslim. A dispute arose and 'Umar violently attacked both his brother-in-law and his own sister. 'When he did that they said to him "Yes, we are Muslims and we believe in God and His apostle and you can do what you like". When 'Umar saw the blood on his sister, he was sorry for what he had done and turned back and said to his sister, 'Give me this sheet which I heard you reading just now so that I may see just what it is which Muhammad has brought', for 'Umar could write. When he said that, his sister replied that she was afraid to trust him with it. 'Do not be afraid', he said and he swore by his gods that he would return it when he had read it. When he said that, she had hopes that he would become a Muslim and said to him, 'My brother, you are unclean in your polytheism and only the clean may touch it'. So 'Umar rose and washed himself and she gave him the page in which was Taha and when he had read the beginning he said 'How fine and noble is this speech ..." [Ibn Hisham, pp. 156-7.]

The Qur'an Dictated by the Prophet

The Qur'an was not only written down by those Companions who did so on their own initiative. Indeed, the Prophet, when a revelation came, called for the scribe and dictated to him. The Prophet while in Madina had several such scribes, [M. M. A'zami, in his book Kuttab al-Nabi (Beirut, 1393/1974) mentions 48 persons who used to write for the Prophet.] among whom Zaid bin Thabit was very prominent.

> Narrated al-Bara': There was revealed **'Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and those who strive and fight in the cause of Allah'** (4: 95). The Prophet said: 'Call Zaid for me and let him bring the board, the ink pot and the scapula bone (or the scapula bone and the ink pot).' Then he said: 'Write: Not equal are those believers ... [Bukhari, VI, No. 512; also VI, No. 116-18.]

It is also reported that material upon which the revelation had been written down was kept in the house of the Prophet. [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p. 58.]

Written during the Prophet's Lifetime

Another report informs us that when people came to Madina to learn about Islam, they were provided with 'copies of the chapters of the Qur'an, to read and learn them by heart'. [Hamidullah, M.: Sahifa Hammam ibn Munabbih, Paris, 1979, p. 64.]

Further evidence for the existence of the Qur'an as a written document during the lifetime of the Prophet comes from the following account:

> 'Abd Allah b. Abu Bakr b. Hazm reported: The book written by the apostle of Allah for 'Amr b. Hazm contained also this that no man should touch the Qur'an without ablution.' [Muwatta', No. 462.]
>
> Malik said: And no one should carry the mushaf by its strap, nor on a pillow, unless he is clean. And even if this be allowed to carry it in its cover, it is not disliked, if there is not in the two hands which carry it, something polluting the mushaf, but it is disliked for the one who carries it, and he is not clean, in honour to the Qur'an and respect to it. Malik said: The best I heard about this is the verse **'None shall touch it but those who are clean'** (56: 79).' [Muwatta', Arabic, p. 204.]

The commentary to the muwatta' explains that the book referred to as written by the Prophet (which means of course written upon his instruction) was sent with some Muslims for instruction in Islam of the people of Yemen. [Muwatta', Arabic, p. 204.]

In fact the Qur'anic verse 56: 79, read in context, clearly explains that the Qur'an is available to those who receive instruction by revelation, in the form of a book or a piece of writing:

**'... this is indeed a Qur'an most honourable, in a book (kitab) well guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean: a revelation from the Lord of the worlds'** (56: 77-80).

The same fact, i.e. that the Qur'an did exist as a written document in the lifetime of the Prophet is proved by the following ahadith:

> From Ibn 'Umar: ... 'The messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: "Do not take the Qur'an on a journey with you, for I am afraid lest it should fall into the hands of the enemy". [Muslim, III, No. 4609, also 4607, 4608; Bukhari, IV, No. 233.]

The correctness of the assumption that the reference is to a written document is supported by one of the transmitters: Ayyub (i. e. one of the narrators in the chain of transmission of this report) said: The enemy may seize it and may quarrel with you over it. [Muslim, III, No. 4609.]

Furthermore, the chapter-heading used by Bukhan for the section, (which usually contains additional information,) explains:

> 'Ibn 'Umar said: No doubt the Prophet and his Companions travelled in the land of the enemy and they knew the Qur'an then.' [i.e. they knew that the Quran was carried - as a scripture - by the Muslims. Bukhan, IV, p. 146, Ch. 129.]

Collection of Revelation during the Prophet's Lifetime

During his last pilgrimage, at the sermon which he gave to the large gathering of Muslims, the Prophet said: 'I have left with you something which if you will hold fast to it you will never fall into error- a plain indication, the book of God and the practice of his prophet. [Ibn Hisham, p. 651.]

This advice from the Prophet to the Muslims implies that the revelation was available as kitab (writing) before his death, for otherwise he would have referred to it in some other term.

From other reports also, we can conclude that the Prophet himself took care of the actual arrangement of the revelation, when it was written down.

Zaid is reported to have said:

> 'We used to compile the Qur'an from small scraps in the presence of the Apostle.' [Itqan, I, p. 99; Salih, p.69.]

'Uthman said, that in later days, the Prophet 'used to, when something was revealed to him, call someone from among those who used to write for him and said: Place these ayat in the sura, in which this and this is mentioned, and when (only) one aya was revealed to him, he said: Place this aya in the sura in which this and this is mentioned'. [Jeffery, A.: Materials for the history of the text of the qura'n, (incl. Kitab al-masahif by Ibn Abi Dawud (abbr. as Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif) Leiden, 1937, p. 31.]

This indicates that not only was the revelation written down during the lifetime of the Prophet, but that he himself gave instructions for the arrangement of the material. According to some other reports, it is also clear, that this proper arrangement and order of the ayat was well known to the Companions of the Prophet, and they were not prepared to tamper with it.

> 'Narrated Ibn Az-Zubair: I said to 'Uthman "This verse which is in Sura al-Baqara: 'those of you who die and leave wives behind ... without turning them out' has been abrogated by another verse. Why then do you write it in the Qur'an?" 'Uthman said: Leave it (where it is) O son of my brother, for I will not shift anything of it (i . e. the Qur'an) from its original position.' [Bukhari, VI. No. 60.]

Similarly quite a number of reports mention the various Suras by their names or beginnings. Two examples may suffice to make this point:

> Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet used to recite the following in the Fajr prayer of Friday: Alif Lam Mim Tanzil (Sajda) (32) and Hal-ata 'ala-l-Insani (al-dahr) (76). [Bukhari, II, No. 16.]

> Abu Huraira said: God's messenger recited in both rak'as of the dawn prayer: "Say O unbelievers (99) and Say, He is God, one God (112).' [Robson, J. (transl.): Mishkat al Masabih, Lahore, 1963, I, pp. 172-3 - Tabrizi: Mishkatal-masabih, Beirut, 1961, I, No. 842.]

The order and arrangement was of course well known to the Muslims due to the daily recitation of the Qur'an in the prayers at the mosque of the Prophet and at other places. Finally there are three ahadith in Sahih Bukhari, informing us that the Angel Gabriel used to recite the Qur'an with the Prophet once a year, but he recited it twice with him in the year he died. The Prophet used to stay in i'tikaf for ten days every year (in the month of Ramad. an), but in the year of his death, he stayed in i'tikaf for twenty days. [Bukhari, VI, No. 520; see also Nos. 518, 519.]

We can therefore distinguish the following measures which ensured the collection of the revelation in writing during the lifetime of the Prophet:

- Revelation used to be written down even in the very early days of the Prophet's call.
- In Madina, the Prophet had several persons who wrote down revelation when it was revealed.
- The Prophet himself instructed his scribes as to where the different revealed verses should be placed, and thus determined the order and arrangement.
- This order and arrangement was well known to the Muslims and strictly observed by them.
- The Angel Gabriel went through all the revelation with Muhammad each year in Ramadan, and went through it twice in the year the Prophet died.
- There are numerous reports about the existence of the written Qur'an - in the form of a book or piece of writing (kitab) during the lifetime of the Prophet.

What did the Prophet leave behind?

The way the material of revelation was left by the Prophet at his death was the most suitable for the Companions in that:

- All parts of the revelation were available both in written form and memorized by the Companions.
- All pieces were available on loose writing material, making it easy to arrange them in the proper order.
- The order already fixed of the ayat within the suras, in the written form, as well as in the memory of the Companions, and of the suras in the memory of the Companions.

What arrangement could have been better than to have everything to hand in written form, as well as memorized by the Muslims, and to have the order and arrangement already determined, partially in the written form and completely in the memories of the people?

It is for these reasons that a later scholar, al-Harith al-Muhasibi in his book kitab fahm al-Sunan, summarized the first phase of the written collection of the Qur'anic material in the following words:

> 'Writing of the Qur'an was no novelty, for the Prophet used to order that it be written down, but it was in separate pieces, on scraps of leather, shoulder blades and palm risp, and when (Abu Bakr) al-Siddiq ordered that it be copied from the (various) places to a common place, which was in the shape of sheets, these (materials) were found in the house of the Prophet in which the Qur'an was spread out, and he gathered it all together and tied it with a string so that nothing of it was lost. [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p. 58.]

It is obvious that the history of the Qur'anic text cannot be compared with that of other Holy Scriptures. While the books of the Old and New Testaments, for example, were written, edited and compiled over long periods, sometimes centuries, the text of the Qur'an, once revelation had ceased, has remained the same to this day.

Suhuf and Mushaf

Both words are derived from the same root Sahafa 'to write'. The word Suhuf also occurs in the Qur'an (87:19) meaning scripture or written sheets.

Suhuf (sg. sahifa) means loose pieces of writing material, such as paper, skin, papyrus, etc.

Mushaf (pl. masahif) means the collected Suhuf, brought together into a fixed order, such as between two covers, into a volume.

In the history of the written text of the Qur'an, Suhuf stands for the sheets on which the Qur'an was collected in the time of Abu Bakr. In these Suhuf the order of the ayat within each sura was fixed, but the sheets with the suras on them were still in a loose arrangement, i.e. not bound into a volume.

Mushaf in the present context means the sheets on which the Qur'an was collected in the time of 'Uthman. Here both the order of the ayat within each sura as well as the order of the sheets were fixed.

Today we also call any copy of the Qur'an, which has both order of ayat and suras fixed, a mushaf.

How the Suhuf were made

Tradition informs us that at the Battle of Yamama (11/633), in the time of Abu Bakr, a number of Muslims, who had memorized the Qur'an were killed. Hence it was feared that unless a written copy of the Qur'an were prepared, a large part of the revelation might be lost.

The following is the account in the Sahih Bukhari

> Narrated Zaid bin Thabit Al-Ansari, one of the scribes of the Revelation: Abu Bakr sent for me after the casualties among the warriors (of the battle) of Yamama (where a great number of Qurra were killed). 'Umar was present with Abu Bakr who said: "Umar has come to me and said, the People have suffered heavy casualties on the day of (the battle of) Yamama, and I am afraid that there will be some casualties among the Qurra (those who know the Qur'an by heart) at other places, whereby a large part of the Qur'an may be lost, unless you collect it. And I am of the opinion that you should collect the Qur'an.' Abu Bakr added, 'I said to 'Umar, "How can I do something which Allah's Apostle has not done?" 'Umar said (to me) "By Allah, it is (really) a good thing". So 'Umar kept on pressing trying to persuade me to accept his proposal, till Allah opened my bosom for it and I had the same opinion as 'Umar'. (Zaid bin Thabit added:) 'Umar was sitting with him (Abu Bakr) and was not speaking. Abu Bakr said (to me), 'You are a wise young man and we do not suspect you (of telling lies or of forgetfulness); and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for Allah's Apostle. Therefore, look for the Qur'an and collect it (in one manuscript)'. By Allah, if he (Abu Bakr) had ordered me to shift one of the mountains (from its place) it would not have been harder for me than what he had ordered me concerning the collection of the Qur'an. I said to both of them, 'How dare you do a thing which the Prophet has not done?' Abu Bakr said, 'By Allah, it is (really) a good thing. So I kept on arguing with him about it till Allah opened my bosom for that which He had opened the bosoms of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. So I started locating the Quranic material and collecting it from parchments, scapula, leafstalks of date palms and from the memories of men (who knew it by heart). I found with Khuzaima two verses of Sura at-Tauba which I had not found with anybody else (and they were):
>
> > **'Verily there has come to you an Apostle (Muhammad) from among yourselves. It grieves him that you should receive any injury or difficulty. He (Muhammad) is ardently anxious over you (to be rightly guided)'** (9:128)**.**

The manuscript on which the Qur'an was collected, remained with Abu Bakr till Allah took him unto Him, and then with 'Umar till Allah took him unto Him, and finally it remained with Hafsa, 'Umar's daughter. [Bukhari, VI, No. 201.]

Here we can distinguish the following steps, which led to the preparation of the Suhuf:

- Zaid was instructed by Abu Bakr to collect the Qur'an.
- Zaid collected it from various written materials and the memories of people.
- The sheets thus prepared were kept with Abu Bakr, then 'Umar, then Hafsa.

**THE MASAHIF OF THE COMPANIONS**

There are numerous indications in the literature of hadith that several of the Companions of the Prophet had prepared their own written collections of the revelations. [Suyuti. Itqan, I, p 62] The best-known among these are from Ibn Mas'ud, Ubay bin Ka'b and Zaid bin Thabit. [See Dodge, B, The Fihrist of al-Nadim, New York, 1970 (abbr. as fihrist), pp 53-63.]

A list of Companions of whom it is related that they had their own written collections included the following: Ibn Mas'ud, Ubay bin Ka'b, 'All, Ibn 'Abbas, Abu Musa, Hafsa, Anas bin Malik, 'Umar, Zaid bin Thabit, Ibn Al-Zubair, 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr,

'A'isha, Salim, Umm Salama, 'Ubaid bin 'Umar. [See Ibn Abi Dawud: Masahif, p 14 Ansari, M.: The qura'nic Foundations and Structure of Muslim Society; Karachi, 1973, drawing upon various sources, says (1, p.76, note 2) that there existed at least 15 written copies of the Qur'an in the Prophet's lifetime. In addition to the list of 15 names quoted above, he includes Abu Bakr, 'Uthman, Mu'adh b. Jabal, Abu Darda', Abu Ayyub Ansari, 'Ubada b. al-Samit, Tamim Dari. This would add up to 23 written copies of the Qur'an, which existed while the Prophet was alive.]

It is also known that 'A'isha and Hafsa had their own scripts written after the Prophet had died. [Rahimuddin, M. (transl.): Muwatta) Imam Malik, Lahore, 1980, No. 307, 308; Malik b. Anas: al-muwatta', Cairo, n.d., p. 105.]

The following is a very brief description of some of the masdhif, which are attributed to the Companions of the Prophet. All the information is based on classical sources. [For details see Ibn Abi Dawud, also fihrist and Itqan]

The Mushaf of Ibn Mas'ud (d. 33/653)

He wrote a mushaf, in which sudras 1, 113 and 114 were not included. Ibn al-Nadim [Fihrist, I, pp. 57-8.] however said he had seen a copy of the Qur'an from Ibn Mas'ud which did not contain al-fatiha (Sura 1). The arrangement of the suras differed from the 'Uthmanic text. The following is the order attributed to Ibn Mas'ud's copy: [Fihrist, I, pp. 53-7.]

> 2, 4, 3, 7, 6, 5, 10, 9, 16, 11, 12, 17, 21, 23, 26, 37, 33, 28, 24, 8, 19, 29, 30, 36, 25, 22, 13, 34, 35, 14, 38, 47, 31, 35, 40, 43, 41, 46, 45, 44, 48, 57, 59, 32, 50, 65, 49, 67, 64, 63, 62, 61, 72, 71, 58, 60, 66, 55, 53, 51, 52, 54, 69, 56, 68, 79, 70, 73, 74, 83, 80, 76, 75, 77, 78, 81, 82, 88, 87, 92, 89, 85, 84, 96, 90, 93, 94, 86, 100, 107, 101, 98, 91, 95, 104, 105, 106, 102, 97, 110, 108, 109, 111, 112.

This list is obviously incomplete. It contains only 106 suras and not 110, as Ibn Nadim wrote.

In Sura al-baqara, which I take as an example, there are a total of 101 variants. Most of them concern spelling, some also choice of words (synonyms), use of particles, etc.

Examples:

> Pronunciation:
>
> 2:70 Ibn Mas'ud reads al-baqira
>
> in place of al-baqara
>
> Spelling:
>
> 2:19 He reads kulla ma
>
> > in place of kullama
>
> Synonyms:
>
> 2:68 He reads sal (seek, beseech)
>
> > in place of ud'u (beseech)

Assuming that all these are reliable reports, the copy of Ibn Mas'ud would then have been prepared for his personal use and written before all 114 suras were revealed.

Nadim, who lived in the tenth century (4th century Hijra) also added: 'I have seen a number of Qur'anic manuscripts, which the transcribers recorded as manuscripts of Ibn Mas'ud. No two of the Qur'anic copies were in agreement and most of them were on badly effaced parchment ... [Fihrist, I, p. 57.]

This note indicates that the question of authentic manuscripts of Ibn Mas'ud needs to be treated with some caution.

The Mushaf of Ubay bin Ka'b (d. 29 H/649)

He wrote a mushaf, in which two 'additional suras and another 'additional aya' were reportedly found.

> [Itqan, I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, pp. 18S1; also Noldeke, T. et al.: Ceschichte des Qorans, Leipzig, 1909-38 (abbr. as GdQ), 11, pp. 33-8.

The first so called sura entitled al-khal' (separation), translates as follows: 'O Allah, we seek your help and ask your forgiveness, and we praise you and we do not disbelieve in you. We separate from and leave who sins against you.'

The second so-called sura, entitled al-hafd (haste) translates as follows: 'O Allah, we worship You and to You we pray and prostrate and to You we run and hasten to serve You. We hope for Your mercy and we fear Your punishment. Your punishment will certainly reach the disbelievers.' Obviously these two pieces constitute so-called 'qunut', i.e. supplications which the Prophet sometimes said in the morning prayer or witr prayer after recitation of suras from the Qur'an. They are in fact identical to some parts of qunut reported in the collections of hadith. See: Nawawi, al-adhkar, Cairo, 1955, pp. 57-8.

As to the single additional so-called aya, its translation is as follows: 'If the son of Adam was given a valley full of riches, he would wish a second one, and if he was given two valleys full of riches, he would surely ask for a third one. Nothing will fill the belly of the son of Adam except dust, and Allah is forgiving to him who is repentant. '

Again this text is known to be a hadith from the Prophet. See Bukhari, VIII, No. 444-47. According to Ibn 'Abbas (No. 445) and 'Ubay (No. 446) this text was at times thought to be part of the Qur'an. However Ubay himself clarifies that after sura 102: I had been revealed, they (i.e. the sahaba) did not consider the above to be part of the Qur'an. See Bukhari, VIII, No. 446. This explanation of Ubay also makes it very clear that the Companions did not differ at all about what was part of the Qur'an and what was not part of the Qur'an. when the revelation had ceased. and if e.g. this hadith occurred in the mushaf of Ubay, it was a mushaf for his own personal use, in other words, his private notebook, where he did not always distinguish between Qur'anic material and hadith, since it was not meant for general use and he himself knew well what to make of his own notes. The same is true of the other copies of the Qur'an, which some of the Companions had for their own personal use. Also those who transmitted to us the reports about these copies of the Qur'an of the Companions have only narrated to us the various differences which occurred there according to reports that reached them (e.g. the hadith in Bukhari, VIII, No. 446 that Ubay at some early stage held this sentence to be part of the Qur'an). However the actual manuscripts of these copies of the Qur'an of the Companions have not come down to us, since all of them agreed on the correctness and validity of the copies which 'Uthman had arranged to be written and distributed for general use. Hence their own personal notebooks became obsolete and were destroyed.]

The order of the suras is again different from 'Uthman as well as Ibn Masud.

The following is the order of suras in the copy attributed to Ubay b. Ka'b: [Fihrist, I, pp. 58-60.]

1, 2, 4, 3, 6, 7, 5, 10, 8, 9, 11, 19, 26, 22, 12, 18, 16, 33, 17, 39, 45, 20, 21, 24, 23, 40, 13, 28, 27, 37, 38, 36, 15, 42, 30, 43, 41, 14, 35, 48, 47, 57, 52, 25, 32, 71, 46, 50, 55, 56, 72, 53, 68, 69, 59, 60, 77, 78, 76, 75, 81, 79, 80, 83, 84, 95, 96, 49, 63, 62, 66, 89, 67, 92, 82, 91, 85, 86, 87, 88, 74?, 98?, 61, 93, 94, 101, 102, 65?, 104, 99, 100, 105, ?, 108, 97, 109, 110, 111, 106, 112, 113, 114.

Again, as in the case of Ibn Mas'ud above this list is incomplete and does not contain all 114 suras of the Qur'an.

'Ubay has a total of 93 variants in Sura al-baqara. [Again taken as example only to illustrate the point.] Very often, his readings are similar to those of Ibn Mas'ud. For example, he reads al-baqara in 2:70 as al-baqira. So does Ibn Mas'ud.

<u>The Mushaf of Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68H/687)</u>

Ibn 'Abbas also wrote a mushaf, which according to the Itqan [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 193.] also included the two additional suras which Ubay had. Again his arrangement of the suras differed from the other copies. In Sura al-baqara, he has a total of 21 variants, some of them identical with Ibn Mas'ud and Ubay as well as other Companions.

<u>Some other Companions</u>

According to the Itqan [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 210.] the mushaf of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 44H/664) contained the same material as Ubay had.

There is only one variant reported from him in Sura al- baqara, namely that he read Ibraham in place of Ibrahim.

Hafsa (d. 45H/665) had three variants in the same sura, and Anas b. Malik (d. 91H/709) had five.

**Examples:**

To further illustrate, here are a number of examples. They have been taken, as far as possible, from well-known suras. While perhaps better examples exist to illustrate the points under discussion, they might not be understood as easily by readers less familiar with the Qur'anic text.

**Difference in vowelling:**

Ibn 'Abbas [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 208.] is reported to have read in sura 111:4

**hamilatun al-hatab**, in place of

**hammalata-l-hatab**

which could not be distinguished on the basis of the early written text, which omitted both haraka and alif.

**Difference in spelling:**

Ibn 'Abbas [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 195.] reportedly wrote in sura 1:6 as well as all other places the word al-sirat as al-sirat.

Some variants attributed to Ibn Mas'ud: [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 25.]

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***1. in Sura al-fatiha:*** | | | | |
| 1:6 | he read | arshidna | in place of | Ihdina |
| | he read | man | in place of | al ladhina |
| | he read | ghaira | in place of | Ghairi |
| ***2. in sura al-baqara:*** | | | | |
| 2:2 | he read | tanzilu-l-kitabiin | in place of | Dhalika-l-kitabu |
| 2:7 | he read | ghishwatun | in place of | Ghishawatun |
| 2:9 | he read | yakhda'dna | in place of | Yukhadi'una |
| 2:14 | he read | bi shayatinihim | in place of | ila shayatinihim etc. |

Variants on Sura Al-Ikhlas, (112)

| Verse | Ibn Mas'ud [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 113.] | 'Ubaid [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 180.] | 'Umar [I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif, p. 222.] | normal reading by |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 112:1 | qul omitted | qul omitted | qul omitted | Ali, Ibn Abbas, Abu Musa, Hafsa |
| | al wahid, in place of al ahad | | | Anas b. Malik, Zaid b. Thabit, Ibn al Zubair, Ibn Amr, |
| 112:2 | omitted | | | |
| 112:3 | lam yulad wa lam yulid, in place of lam yalid wa lam yulad | | | Aisha, Salim, Umm Salama, Ubaid b. Umar |

Even today the variants and synonyms are found in such copies of the text as are attributed to the Companions and are of some value to us in the sense that they may have served as an early rudimentary form of tafsir. For example, according to some reports the words 'salat al-wusta' (middle prayer) were read and written by Hafsa, [Muwatta' Malik; Jeffery, p. 214.] Ubay [Jeffery, p. 122.] and Ibn 'Abbas [Jeffery, p. 196.] as 'salat al-'asr' (i.e. afternoon prayer).

As long as the sahaba wrote their own copies for personal use only, there was nothing wrong, if they did not strictly adhere to the order of suras which was the order of the Qur'an. Later on, when 'Uthman's copy became the standard version, the Companions adopted the order of this copy including Ibn Mas'ud who perhaps differed most. [Ibn Abi Dawud, p. 12; Salih, S.: Mabahith fi 'ulum al-qura'n, Beirut, 1964,]

There were also, as indicated, some variant readings in these copies, [See also below, seven readings and qira'at.] when some words were pronounced and spelt in slightly different ways, etc. However, it should be noted that variant readings are usually reported by a single person only, and occasionally by perhaps two or three while the version called the 'Uthmanic text is mutawatir, i.e. transmitted by numerous people and is without doubt authentic.

**THE MUSHAF OF 'UTHMAN**

During the time of 'Uthman differences in reading the Qur'an became obvious, and after consultation with the Companions, 'Uthman had a standard copy prepared from the Suhuf of Abu Bakr that were kept with Hafsa at that time.

The following is the report transmitted in the Sahih Bukhari:

> Narrated Anas bin Malik: Hudhaifa bin Al-Yaman came to 'Uthman at the time when the people of Sham and the people of Iraq were waging war to conquer Arminya and Adharbijan. Hudhaifa was afraid of their (the people of Sham and Iraq) differences in the recitation of the Qur'an, so he said to 'Uthmfin, 'O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (Qur'an), as Jews and the Christians did before'. So 'Uthman sent a message to Hafsa saying, 'Send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you'. Hafsa sent it to 'Uthman. 'Uthman then ordered Zaid bin Thabit, 'Abdullah bin Az-Zubair, Sa'id bin Al-'As and 'Abdur Rahman bin Hari-bin Hisham to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies. 'Uthman said to the three Quraishi men, 'In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of Quraish as the Qur'an was revealed in their tongue'. They did so, and when they had written many copies, 'Uthman returned the original manuscripts to Hafsa. 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt. Zaid bin Thabit added, 'A verse from Sura al-Ahzab was missed by me when we copied the Qur'an and I used to hear Allah's Apostle reciting it. So we searched for it and found it with Khuzaima bin Thabit Al-Ansari'. (That verse was): **'Among the Believers are men who have been true in their convenant with Allah'** (33: 23). [Bukhari, VI, No. 510]

The following events led to the preparation of the mushaf of 'Uthman:

- Disputes had arisen among the Muslims about the correct manner of reciting the Qur'an.
- 'Uthman borrowed the Suhuf, which were kept with Hafsa.
- 'Uthman ordered four Companions, among them Zaid bin Thabit, to rewrite the script in perfect copies.
- 'Uthman sent these copies to the main centres of the Muslims to replace other materials that were in circulation.

Chronology of the Written Text

Around 610 Muhammad's Prophethood commences.

1st revelation in cave on Mount Hira

Transmitted orally, later in written form.

610-32 Muhammad in Makka and Madina.

Continious revelation on numerous occasions

Transmitted orally after memorisation by many, and writing down of revelation by various companions upon the direct instruction of the Prophet himself.

632 Prophets death. Last revelation few days before this.

Compelete revelation left behind both in the memories of various companions as well as on various writing materials.

At the death of the Prophet, complete revelation left behind.

632-34 Abu Bakrs caliphate

633 During the battle of Yamama several companions who knew the Quran by heart were killed.

Abu Bakr instructs Zaid b. Thabit to prepare a single copy of the complete revelation.

Zaid b. Thabit brings together all the revelation into the Suhuf from both oral as well as written sources demanding two witnesses for each piece. The Suhuf remain with Abu Bakr.

During the 1st/2nd year after the Prophets death the entire revelation was copied onto sheets (Suhuf).

634-44 Umar's Caliphate.

The Suhuf remain with Umar.

644-56 Uthmans Caliphate.

The Suhuf remain with Hafsa bint Umar.

653 Campaign against Armenia and Azerbaidjan.

Serious differences arose among muslims about the correct recitation of the Quran. Uthman instructs Zaid together with three other sahaba to prepare copies from the Suhuf kept with Hafsa.

Zaid and three Companions prepare a number of fresh copies from the Suhuf. These copies are sent to the various muslim regions to replace other material in circulation. Suhuf returned to Hafsa. 'Uthman also keeps one copy (mushaf).

Several copies of the entire revelation available through out the muslim lands.

What the Prophet left to the Muslims

The revelation, as left by the Prophet, was available both orally and written on various materials. Its internal order was known to the Muslims and strictly observed by them.

Abu Bakr collected these loose materials and had their contents written on to sheets (Suhuf).

The Difference between Abu Bakr's and 'Uthman's Collection

Abu Bakr had made one single copy from the various verbal and written material. This copy was later kept by 'Umar and then by his daughter Hafsa.

'Uthman had many copies prepared from this copy and sent them to various places in the Muslim world, while the original Suhuf were returned to Hafsa and remained with her until her death. Later, Marwan b. Hakam (d. 65/684), according to a report in Ibn Abi Dawud, collected it from her heirs and had it destroyed, presumably fearing it might become the cause for new disputes. 'Uthman also kept one of the copies for himself. This version of the text, also known as 'Mushaf 'Uthman in fact constitutes the ijma'(consensus) of the sahaba, all of whom agreed that it contained what Muhammad had brought as revelation from Allah.

[According to Ibn Abi Dawud (117-8) eleven changes were made under al-Hajjaj, among them e.g. 5:48 **'shari'atan wa minhajan'** into **'shir'atan wa minhajan'**; 12:45 **'ana atikum bi-ta'wilihi'** into **ana unabbi'ukum bi ta'wilihi**. These are again according to Ibn Abi Dawud mistakes which were made in the preparation of Uthmans copy (pp. 37-49). The first version of 12:45 e.g. was the reading of 'Ubay (ibid. p. 138) and Ibn Masud (ibid. p. 39).]

The wide distribution of this text and its undisputed authority can also be deduced from the reports on the battle of Siffin (A.H. 37) 27 years after the death of the Prophet, and five years after 'Uthman's copies were distributed, Mu'awiya's troops fixed sheets from the Qur'an on their spears to interrupt the battle. [See Suyuti, History of the Caliphs. transl. H. S. Jarrett. Baptist Mission Presss Calcutta. 1881, p. 177.] However nobody accused anyone else of using a 'partisan' version of the text, which would have made a splendid accusation against the enemy.

## CHAPTER 3 : The Qur'an in Manuscript and Print

### THE QUR'ANIC SCRIPT

Writing, although not very widespread in pre-Islamic time, was well-known among the Arabs. The script used in the seventh century, i. e . during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, consisted of very basic symbols, which expressed only the consonantal structure of a word, and even that with much ambiguity.

While today letters such as ba, ta, tha, ya, are easily distinguished by points, this was not so in the early days and all these letters used to be written simply as a straight line.

From this very basic system of writing there developed over the ages, various types of script, such as *Kufi, Maghribi, Naskh*, etc., which spread all over the world.

The later invention of printing with standardised types has contributed to formalising the writing.

However, as far as the actual script of the Qur'an is concerned, there were two important steps which brought about the forms in which we have the Qur'anic text as it is today. These were the introduction of:

- Vowelling marks (tashkil).
- Diacritical marks (i'jam).

Tashkil

Tashkil is the name for the signs indicating the vowels in Arabic scripts. They were apparently unknown in pre-Islamic times. These signs help to determine the correct pronunciation of the word and to avoid mistakes.

Example: Byt Baitun

When more and more Muslims of non-Arab origin and also many ignorant Arabs' [Yaqut reports in his book irshad that al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf himself once read ahabba in 9: 24 wrongly as ahabbu, see GdQ. 111, 124, note 6.] studied the Qur'an, faulty pronunciation and wrong readings began to increase. It is related that at the time of Du'all (d. 69H/638) someone in Basra read the following aya from the Qur'an in a faulty way, which changed the meaning completely: :

> **That God and His apostle dissolve obligations with the pagans** (9: 3).
>
> **That God dissolves obligations with the pagans and the apostle** (9: 3).

The mistake occurred through wrongly reading rasulihi in place of rasuluhu, which could not be distinguished from the written text, because there were no signs or accents indicating the correct pronunciation. Unless someone had memorized the correct version he could out of ignorance easily commit such a mistake. [See also fihrist, 1, pp. 87-8.] The signs or accents to prevent such problems were introduced not long before the i'jam and then got the shape they have to this day: [Hughes,T.P.: A Dictionary of Islam London,1895 p.687.]

For an example of the old style see plate 5.

It has been suggested that the origin of fatha is alif, the origin of kasra is ya (without dots as in early books), and the origin of damma is waw. Hamza was previously written as 2 dots. [Abbott, N.: The Rise of the North-Arabic Script and its Koranic Development, Chicago, 1939, p. 39]

**I'jam** (to provide a letter with a diacritical point)

The Arabic letters, as we know them today, are made up of lines and points. The latter are called i'jam. The ancient Arabic script did not have them, but consisted of strokes only.

The addition of diacritical points to the plain writing of strokes helped to distinguish the various letters which could be easily mixed up.

Example: XXX XXX

Without dots this word cannot be easily recognized. With i'jam, the letters of this word can easily be distinguished.

Although the i'jam (diacritical points) were already known in pre-Islamic times, they were rarely used. The very early copies of the Qur'anic manuscripts (and Arabic writing in general) did not have these signs. They were apparently introduced into the Qur'anic script during the time of the fifth Umayyad Caliph, 'Abd al-Malik bin Marwan (66-86H/685-705) and the governorship of Al-Hajjaj in Iraq, when more and more Muslims began to read and study the Qur'an, some of whom did not know much of the Qur'an, and others were of non-Arab origin. It is said of the well-known tabi'l Al-Du'all that he was the first to introduce these points into the Qur'anic text.

## EARLY MANUSCRIPTS

Writing Material

Early manuscripts of the Qur'an were typically written on animal skin. We know that in the lifetime of the Prophet, parts of the revelation were written on all kinds of materials, such as bone, animal skin, palm risps, etc. The ink was prepared from soot.

Script

All old Qur'anic script is completely without any diacritical points or vowel signs as explained above. Also there are no headings or separations between the sSras nor any other kind of division, nor even any formal indication of the end of a verse. Scholars distinguish between two types of early writing:

- Kufi, which is fairly heavy and not very dense.
- Hijazi, which is lighter, more dense and slightly inclined towards the right.

Some believe that the Hijazi is older than the Kufi, while others say that both were in use at the same time, but that Hijazi was the less formal style. [This is the view of N. Abbott: 'We can no longer draw a chronological demarcation line between what are commonly termed the Kufi and the Naskhi scripts, nor can we consider the latter as a development of the former. This ... now demands a more general recognition. Our materials show that there were two tendencies at work simultaneously, both of them natural ones' (Abbott, op. cit., p.16)]

Some Peculiarities of the Ancient Writing

Numerous copies of the Qur'an were made after the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and the writers of these manuscripts strictly observed the autography of the 'Uthmanic Qur'an. There are, compared to the usual Arabic spelling, some peculiarities. Here are a few of them, only concerning the letters alif, yti, WtiW, by way of examples: [For more examples see Kamal, op. cit., pp.47-9; a list of these peculiarities has been provided by M. Hamidullah: 'Orthographical Peculiarities in the text of the Qur'an, in: Islamic Order, 3 (4), 1981, pp.72-86.]

- The letter alif is often written on top of a letter instead of afterit,
- The letter ya (or alif) of the word is omitted,
- Some words have the letter waw in place of alif,

## OLD MANUSCRIPTS OF THE QUR'AN

Most of the early original Qur'an manuscripts, complete or in sizeable fragments, that are still available to us now, are not earlier than the second century after the Hijra. The earliest copy, which was exhibited in the British Museum during the 1976 World of Islam Festival, dated from the late second century. [Lings, M. and Y. H. Safadi: The Qur'an, London, 1976, No. 1A. See also plate 6] However, there are also a number of odd fragments of Qur'anic papyri available, which date from the first century. [Grohmann, A.: Die Entstehung des Koran und die altesten Koran-Handschriften', in: Bustan, 1961, pp. 33-8.]There is a copy of the Qur'an in the Egyptian National Library on parchment made from gazelle skin, which has been dated 68 Hijra (688 A.D.), i.e. 58 years after the Prophet's death.

What happened to 'Uthman's Copies?

It is not known exactly how many copies of the Qur'an were made at the time of 'Uthman, but Suyuti [Makhdum, 1.: Tarikh al-mushaf al-'Uthmani fi Tashqand, Tashkent 1391/1971 p. 17] says: 'The well-known ones are five'. This probably excludes the copy that 'Uthman kept for himself. The cities of Makka, Damascus, Kufa, Basra and Madina each received a copy. ' [GdQ, 111. 6, Note 1.]There are a number of references in the older Arabic literature on this topic which together with latest information available may be summarised as follows:

*The Damascus Manuscript*

Al-Kindi (d. around 236/850) wrote in the early third century that three out of four of the copies prepared for 'Uthman were destroyed in fire and war, while the copy sent to Damascus was still kept at his time at Malatja. [GdQ. 111, 6. Note 1.]

Ibn Batuta (779/1377) says he has seen copies or sheets from the copies of the Qur'an prepared under 'Uthman in Granada, Marakesh, Basra and other cities. [Salih, op. cit., p.87.]

Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1372) relates that he has seen a copy of the Qur'an attributed to 'Uthman, which was brought to Damascus in the year 518 Hijra from Tiberias (Palestine). He said it was 'very large, in beautiful clear strong writing with strong ink, in parchment, I think, made of camel skin'. [Salih, op. cit., p.88.]

Some believe that the copy later on went to Leningrad and from there to England. After that nothing is known about it. Others hold that this mushaf remained in the mosque of Damascus, where it was last seen before the fire in the year 1310/1892.' [Salih, op. cit., p.89; Muir, in 'The Mameluke Dynasties' also writes that this manuscript was burnt in Damascus in 1893; see Abbott, op. cit., p.51.]

*The Egyptian Manuscript*

There is a copy of an old Qur'an kept in the mosque of al-Hussain in Cairo. Its script is of the old style, although Ki6, and it is quite possible that it was copied from the Mushaf of 'Uthman. [Kamal, op. cit., p.56.]

*The Madina Manuscript*

Ibn Jubair (d. 614/1217) saw the manuscript in the mosque of Madina in the year 580/1184. Some say it remained in Madlna until the Turks took it from there in 1334/1915. It has been reported that this copy was removed by the Turkish authorities to Istanbul, from where it came to Berlin during World War I. The Treaty of Versailles, which concluded World War I, contains the following clause:

> 'Article 246: Within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty, Germany will restore to His Majesty, King of Hedjaz, the original Koran of Caliph Othman, which was removed from Medina by the Turkish authorities and is stated to have been presented to the ex-Emperor William II." [Israel, Fred L. (ed.): Major Peace Treaties of Modern History, New York, Chelsea House Pub., Vol. ll, p.l418.]

The manuscript then reached Istanbul, but not Madina. [The same information about this copy was published in a Cairo magazine in 1938 (Makhdum, op. cit., p.l9). Surprisingly the standard book Geschichre des Qorans, the third part of which was published in Germany in 1938, i.e. well after the Treaty of Versailles, although discussing the 'Uthmanic Qur'an and old manuscripts in detail, makes no reference whatsoever to this event. Also, the writer of the History of the Mushaf of ' Uthman in Tashkent, indicates that he does not know what to make of this reference.]

*The 'Imam' Manuscript*

This is the name used for the copy which 'Uthman kept himself, and it is said he was killed while reading it. [Ibn Said: al-Tabaqatal-kubra, Cairo, n.d., Vol. 111, (1). pp. 51-2.]

According to some the Umayyads took it to Andalusia, from where it came to Fas (Morocco) and according to Ibn Batuta it was there in the eighth century after the Hijra, and there were traces of blood on it. From Morocco, it might have found its way to Samarkand.

*The Samarkand Manuscript*

[Makhdum, op. cit., p.22ff.]

This is the copy now kept in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). It may be the Imam manuscript or one of the other copies made at the time of 'Uthman.

It came to Samarkand in 890 Hijra (1485) and remained there till 1868. Then it was taken to St. Petersburg by the Russians in 1869. It remained there till 1917. A Russian orientalist gave a detailed description of it, saying that many pages were damaged and some were missing. A facsimile, some 50 copies, of this mushaf was produced by S. Pisareff in 1905. A copy was sent to the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdul Hamid, to the Shah of Iran, to the Amir of Bukhara, to Afghanistan, to Fas and some important Muslim personalities. One copy is now in the Columbia University Library (U.S.A.). [The Muslim World, Vol . 30 ( 1940), pp.357-8.]

The manuscript was afterwards returned to its former place and reached Tashkent in 1924, where it has remained since. Apparently the Soviet authorities have made further copies, which are presented from time to time to visiting Muslim heads of state and other important personalities. In 1980, photocopies of such a facsimile were produced in the United States, with a two-page foreword by M. Hamidullah.

The writer of the History of the Mushaf of 'UthmtIn in Tashkent gives a number of reasons for the authenticity of the manuscript. They are, excluding the various historical reports which suggest this, as follows:

- The fact that the mushaf is written in a script used in the first half of the first century Hijra.
- The fact that it is written on parchment from a gazelle, while later Qur'ans are written on paper-like sheets.
- The fact that it does not have any diacritical marks which were introduced around the eighth decade of the first century; hence the manuscript must have been written before that.
- The fact that it does not have the vowelling symbols introduced by Du'ali, who died in 68 Hijra; hence it is earlier than this.

In other words: two of the copies of the Qur'an which were originally prepared in the time of Caliph 'Uthman, are still available to us today and their text and arrangement can be compared, by anyone who cares to, with any other copy of the Qur'an, be it in print or handwriting, from any place or period of time. They will be found identical.

*The 'Ali Manuscript*

Some sources indicate that a copy of the Qur'an written by the fourth Caliph 'Ali is kept in Najaf, Iraq, in the Dar al-Kutub al-'Alawiya. It is written in Kufi script, and on it is written: "Ali bin Abi Talib wrote it in the year 40 of the Hijra'. [Attar, D.: Mujaz 'ulum al-qur'an, Beirut 1399/1979, p. 116]

**THE QUR'AN IN PRINT**

From the sixteenth century, when the printing press with movable type was first used in Europe and later in all parts of the world, the pattern of writing and of printing the Qur'an was further standardised.

There were already printed copies of the Qur'an before this, in the so-called block-print form, and some specimens from as early as the tenth century, both of the actual wooden blocks and the printed sheets, have come down to us. [Grohmann, op. cit.. p.38; Exhibition in the British Library, London.]

The first extant Qur'an for which movable type was used was printed in Hamburg (Germany) in 1694. The text is fully vocalised. [Al-Coranus, lex islamitica Muhammedis, Officina Schultzio-Schilleriania. Hamburg, 1694; Exhibition No. 22.] Probably the first Qur'an printed by Muslims is the so-called 'Mulay Usman edition' of 1787, published in St. Petersburg, Russia, followed by others in Kazan (1828), Persia (1833) and Istanbul (1877). [Blachere, R.: Introduction au Coran, Paris, 1947, p. 133.]

In 1858, the German orientalist Fluegel produced together with a useful concordance the so-called 'Fluegel edition' of the Qur'an, printed in Arabic, which has since been used by generations of orientalists. [Fluegel, Gustav: Corani texn Arabicus. Leipzig, 1834.] The Fluegel edition has however a very basic defect: its system of verse numbering is not in accordance with general usage in the Muslim world. [See e.g. 74: 31, where he makes four verses out of one.]

The Egyptian Edition

The Qur'anic text in printed form now used widely in the Muslim world and developing into a 'standard version', is the so-called 'Egyptian' edition, also known as the King Fu'ad edition, since it was introduced in Egypt under King Fu'ad. This edition is based on the reading of Hafs, as reported by 'Asim, and was first printed in Cairo in 1925/1344H. Numerous copies have since been printed.

The Sa'd Nursi Copy

Finally, the Qur'an printed by the followers of Sa'id Nursi from Turkey should be mentioned as an example of combining a hand-written beautifully illuminated text with modern offset printing technology. The text was hand written by the Turkish calligrapher Hamid al-'Amidi. It was first printed in Istanbul in 1947, but since 1976 has been produced in large numbers and various sizes at the printing press run by the followers of Sa'id Nursi in West Berlin (Germany).

## CHAPTER 4: Form, Language and Style

### DIVISIONS OF THE TEXT

Aya and Sura

Aya (pl. ayat) actually means 'sign'. In technical language it is the shortest division of the Qur'anic text, i.e. a phrase or sentence. The revelation is guidance from God to mankind and it is therefore not at all surprising to find that its smallest divisions are called (guiding) 'signs'. The term 'verse' is not appropriate since the Qur'an is not poetry.

Sura (pl. Suwar) means literally 'row' or 'fence'. In technical language, it is the passage-wise division of the Qur'anic text,i.e. a chapter or part, set apart from the preceding and following text.

The Qur'an has 114 suras of unequal length, the shortest consisting of four and the longest of 286 ayat.

All suras (with the exception of Sura 9) begin with the words bismillahir rahmanir rahim. This is not a later addition to the text, but was already used, even before Muhammad's call to prophethood. ' [See Sura 27: 30.]

All 114 suras in the Qur'an have names, which serve as a sort of heading. The names are often derived from an important or distinguishing word in the text itself, such as e.g. al-anfal (8) or al-baqara (2). In other cases it is one of the first few words with which the sSra begins e.g. ta-ha (20) or al-furqan (25).

Order and Arrangement

Both the order of the ayat within each sura and the arrangement of the suras were finally determined by the Prophet under guidance from the Angel Gabriel in the year of his death, when Gabriel twice came to revise the text with him. [See above. transmission of the Qur'anic revelation, p. 31.]

Scholars have also grouped the suras into four kinds:

- al-tiwal (long ones): 2-10.
- al-mi'un: suras with approximately 100 ayat: 10-35.
- al-mathani: suras with less than 100 ayat: 36-49.
- al-mufassal: the last section of the Qur'an beginning with Sura qaf: 50-114.

Other Divisions of the Text

Juz' (pl. ajza') literally means part, portion. The Qur'an is divided into 30 portions of approximately equal length for easy recitation during the thirty nights of a month, especially of the month of Ramadan. Usually they are indicated by the word and the number of it given alongside, (e.g. juz' 30 beginning with Sura 78).

Some copies of the Qur'an have the suras divided into paragraphs called ruku'. They are indicated by the symbol and the explanation of the Arabic numerals written with each is as follows, e.g. 2:20:

- The top figure (2) indicates that this is the second completed ruku ' in the respective sura (here Sura al-baqara) .
- The middle figure (13) indicates that this completed ruku' contains 13 ayat.
- The lower figure (2) indicates that this is the second ruku' in the respective juz' (here first juz').

Copies of the Qur'an printed in the Middle East in particular have each juz' subdivided into four hizb indicated by the sign e.g. 2:74 is the beginning of the second hizb of the Qur'an, indicated by the figure 2:

Each hizb is again subdivided into quarters

The Qur'anic text is also divided into seven parts of approximately equal length, called manzil, for recitation over seven days, indicated in some copies by the word manzil and the respective number in the margin. The following table shows the division of the text into juz' and manzil: [Hamidullah, Muhammad: Le Saint Coran. Traduction integraleetnores. Paris:

Club Francais du Livre, n.d., p.XLI.]

| Manzil | Juz | Sura |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 1:1 |
| | 2 | 2:142 |
| | 3 | 2:253 |
| | 4 | 3:92 or 93 |
| | 5 | 4:24 |
| | 6 | 4:148 |
| 2 | 6 | 5:1 |
| | 7 | 5:82 or 83 |
| | 8 | 6:111 |
| | 9 | 7:88 |
| | 9 | 7:286 |
| | 10 | 8:41 |
| | 11 | 9:93 or 94 |
| 3 | 11 | 10:1 |
| | 12 | 11:6 |
| | 13 | 12:53 |
| | 13 | 13:15 |
| | 14 | 15:1 or 2 |
| | 14 | 16:50 |
| 4 | 15 | 17:1 |
| | 15 | 17:109 |
| | 16 | 18:75 |
| | 16 | 19:58 |
| | 17 | 21:1 |
| | 17 | 22:18 |
| | 17 | 22:77 |
| | 18 | 23:1 |
| | 19 | 25:21 |
| | 19 | 25:60 |
| 5 | 19 | 27:1 |
| | 19 | 27:26 |
| | 20 | 27:56 or 60 |
| | 21 | 29:45 or 46 |
| | 21 | 32:15 |
| | 22 | 33:31 |
| 6 | 22 | 35:1 |
| | 23 | 36:22 or 28 |
| | 23 | 38:24 or 25 |
| | 24 | 39:32 |
| | 24 | 41:38 |
| | 25 | 41:47 |
| | 26 | 46:1 |
| 7 | 26 | 50:1 |
| | 27 | 51:31 |
| | 27 | 53:62 |
| | 28 | 58:1 |
| | 29 | 67:1 |
| | 30 | 78:1 |
| | 30 | 84:21 |
| | 30 | 96:19 |

The ends of the various manzil according to Qatada are 4:76, 8:36, 15:49, 23:118, 34:54, 49:18 and 114:6 [Ibn Abi

Dawud, p. 118.]

**LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY**

The language of the Qur'an - as is we11 known- is Arabic. The Qur'an itself gives some indication about its language:

> **'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that ye may learn wisdom'** (Al-Qur'an 12: 2).

In another place the language of the Qur'an is called 'pure Arabic' ('arabiyyun mubin):

> **'This (tongue) is Arabic, pure and clear'** (16: 103).

The question that arises is: Why was the Qur'an revealed in Arabic, and not in any other language? The first and perhaps the most obvious reason is already referred to in the Qur'an, namely that because the messenger who was to announce this message was an Arab, it is only natural that the message should be announced in his language:

> **'Had We sent this as a Qur'an (in a language) other than Arabic they could have said: Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! (a book) not in Arabic and (a messenger) an Arab? Say: It is a guide and a healing to those who believe ...'** (Al-Qur'an 41: 44).

Another important reason concerns the audience which was to receive the message. The message had to be in a language understood by the audience to whom it was first addressed, i.e. the inhabitants of Makka and the surrounding areas:

> **'Thus We have sent by inspiration to thee an Arabic Qur'an: that thou mayest warn the mother of the cities and all around her- and warn (them) of the day of assembly of which there is no doubt (when) some will be in the garden and some in the blazing fire'** (Al-Qur'an 42: 7).

The Qur'an Needed to be Understood

The Qur'an contains revelation from Allah and the true nature of revelation is to guide mankind from darkness to light:

> **'A book which we have revealed unto thee in order that thou mightest lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light- by the leave of thy Lord- to the way of (Him) the exalted in power, worthy of all praise'** (Al-Qur'an 14: 1).

The revelation came in the language of the messenger and his people in order that it might be understood:

> **'We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic that ye may be able to understand (and learn wisdom)'** (Al-Qur'an 43: 3).

In the nrocess of understanding a message two steps are essential:

- To receive the message correctly and completely, in this case to receive its words correctly and completely.
- To 'decode' it, to grasp the meanings of the message received.

Only the combination of the two elements, i.e. reception and decoding, lead to proper understanding of the message.

To Understand the Qur'an

It is not correct to assume that understanding the Qur'an in order to take guidance from it depends upon direct knowledge of the Arabic language, since there are numerous Arabic-speaking people who do not understand the message of the Qur'an. Rather the Qur'an tells us that right guidance comes only from Allah:

> **'This is the guidance of God: He giveth that guidance to whom He pleaseth of His worshippers ...'** (Al-Qur'an 6: 88).

However, to understand the language of the Qur'an is a prerequisite to fully grasp its meanings. Hence many Muslims have learned this language. Others, who have not done so, make use of translations, which for them is an indirect means

of knowing the language, as in the translations the meanings of the Qur'an have been rendered into their mother tongues so that they may familiarise themselves with the message from Allah.

This message can be understood by all human beings who are willing to listen, for the Qur'an is not difficult but easy:

> **'We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to remember: but is there any that remembers it?'** (Al-Qur'an 54: 17).

Non-Arabic Words in the Qur'an

There is some difference of opinion among scholars whether the language of the Qur'an includes expressions which are not Arabic. Some (among them Tabari and Baqillani) hold that all in the Qur'an is Arabic and that words of non-Arabic origin found in the Qur'an were nevertheless part of Arabic speech. Although these words were of non-Arab origin the Arabs used and observed them and they became genuinely integrated in the Arabic language.

However, it is conceded that there are non-Arabic proper names in the Qur'an, such as Isra'il, Imran, Nuh., etc.

Others have said that the Qur'an does contain words not used in the Arabic language, such as e.g.:

- al-Qistas (17:35), derived from the Greek language.
- al-Sijjil (15: 74), derived from the Persian language.
- al-Ghassaq (78: 25), derived from the Turkish language.
- al-Tur (2:63), derived from the Syriac language.
- al-Kifl (57: 28), derived from the Abyssinian language.

Some scholars have written books on the topic of 'foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an', e.g. Suyuti, who compiled a small book with a list of 118 expressions in different languages. [The Mutawakkili of Al-Suyuti7, trans. by William Y. Bell, Yale University Dissertations, 1924; see also Itqan.]

**LITERARY FORMS AND STYLE**

The Qur'an is the revelation from Allah for the guidance of mankind and not poetry or literature. Nevertheless it is expressed verbally and in written form, and hence its literary forms and style may be considered here briefly.

Broadly speaking there are two main literary forms:

- Prose.
- Poetry.

By prose is meant a way of expression close to the everyday spoken language, and distinct from poetry insofar as it lacks any conspicuous artifice of rhythm and rhyme.

The Qur'an is not Poetry

Not only European orientalists have described some passages of the Qur'an as more 'poetic' than others: the opponents of Mu4ammad had already used this argument, accusing him of being a poet or a soothsayer. This is refuted by the Qur'an itself:

> **'It is not the word of a poet; little it is ye believe! Nor is it the word of a soothsayer: little admonition it is ye receive. (This is) a message sent down from the Lord of the worlds'** (Al-Qur'an 69: 40-43)

The accusations against Muhammad refuted in the above passage are based on the usage of a particular style, employed in the Qur'an, which is said to be like saj' or close to it.

The word saj' is usually translated as 'rhymed prose', i.e. a literary form with some emphasis on rhythm and rhyme, but distinct from poetry. Saj' is not really as sophisticated as poetry, but has been employed by Arab poets, and is the best

known of the pre-Islamic Arab prosodies. It is distinct from poetry in its lack of metre, i.e. it has no consistent rhythmic pattern, and it shares with poetry the element of rhyme, [Called fasila ( pl. fawasil) when used for the Qur'an] though in many cases somewhat irregularly employed.

The Difference between Literature and the Qur'an

Ibn Khaldun (d. 809H/1406), the well-known author of the muqaddima pointed out in a passage on the literature of the Arabs the difference between literature and the Qur'an in general and between saj' and the Qur'an in particular:

> 'It should be known that the Arabic language and Arab speech are divided into two branches. One of them is rhymed poetry ... The other branch is prose, that is, non-metrical speech ... The Qur'an is in prose. However, it does not belong in either of the two categories. It can neither be called straight prose nor rhymed prose. It is divided into verses. One reaches breaks where taste tells one that the speech stops. It is then resumed and "repeated" in the next verse. (Rhyme) letters, which would make that (type of speech) rhymed prose are not obligatory, nor do rhymes (as used in poetry) occur. This situation is what is meant by the verse of the Qur'an:
>
> > **'God revealed the best story, a book harmoniously arranged with repeated verses ...'** (Al-Qur'an 39: 23).
>
> [Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddima, Princeton, 1967, Vol. 3, p.368; Ibn Khaldun: Muqaddima, Cairo, n.d., p.424.]

Examples:

A good example for a saj'-like passage in the Qur'an would be Sura al-ikhlas (112: 14). It is somewhat irregular in its rhythm, and it has a rhyme ending with the syllable "ad":

**Qul huwa llahu ahad** Say: He is God the One and Only

**Alahus samad** God the Eternal, Absolute

**Lam yalid wa lam yulad** He begetteth not nor is He begotten

**wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad** And there is none like unto Him.

Of the many passages more like plain prose, although not quite identical to it, as the kind of end-rhyme indicates, the following may serve as an example:

**'Inna auhaina ilaika kama** We have sent thee inspiration as We sent it

**auhaina ila nuhin wa nabiyina** to Noah and the messengers

**min ba'dihi wa auhaina ila** after him: We sent inspiration to

**ibrahima wa isma'ila wa** Abraham, Ismail,

**ishaqa wa ya'quba** Isaac, Jacob

**wa-l-asbati wa 'isa wa ayyuba** and the tribes, to Jesus, Job,

**wa yunusa wa haruna wa** Jonah,Aaron, and

**sulaimana wa ataina dawuda** Solomon, and to David

**Zabura. Wa rusulan qad** we gave the Psalms. Of some apostles

**qasasnahum 'alaika min** We have already told thee

**qablu wa rusulan lam** the story, of others

**naqsushum 'alaika wa** We have not.

**kallama llahu musa taklima.** And to Moses God direct spoke.

**Rusulan mubashshirina wa** Apostles who gave good news as well as

**mundhirina li'alla yakuna** warning that mankind after

**li-nnasi 'ala llahi hujjatun** (the coming) of the apostles should have

**ba'dar rusuli wa kana llahu** no plea against God;

**'azizan hakima** (Al-Qur'an 4: 163-165) for God is exalted in power, wise.

Narrative in the Qur'an

The Qur'an contains many narratives (qisas, sg. qissa), referred to in the Qur'an itself:

> **'We do relate unto thee the most beautiful of stories, in that We reveal to thee this (portion of the) Qur'an ...'**(Al-Qur'an 12: 3).

These narratives, which illustrate and underline important aspects of the Qur'anic message, fulfil their functions in a variety of ways. The following are some of the more common patterns:

Explanation of the general message of Islam.

- General guidance and reminder.
- Strengthening the conviction of the Prophet and the believers.
- Reminder of the earlier prophets and their struggle.
- Indication for the continuity and truth of Muh. ammad's message.
- Providing arguments against some opponents of Islam, such as e.g. Jews and Christians.
- As far as the contents of these narratives are concerned, one may, broadly speaking, distinguish between the following three kinds:
- Stories of the Prophets of Allah, their peoples, their message, their call, their persecution, etc.; such as e g. the narratives about Nuh (Sura 26), Musa (Sura 28), 'Isa (Sura 19) and many others.
- Other Qur'anic narratives about past people or events, such as the narratives about the Companions of the cave, or about Dhu-l-qarnain (Sura 18).
- References to events that took place during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, such as the battle of Badr (3: 13), the battle of Uhud (3: 121-8), the battle of Ah. Zab (33: 9-27), the israJ(17: 1), etc.

Similes in the Qur'an

The Qur'an also employs similes (amthal, sg. mathal) in many places to explain certain truths or to drive home important points of the message, by likening it to something well known or describing it in a pictorial manner. [See, e.g. 16: 75-6.]

> **'He sends down water from the skies and the channels flow, each according to its measure; but the torrents bear away the foam that mounts up to the surface. Even so, from that (ore) which they heat in the fire to make ornaments or utensils therewith there is scum likewise, thus doth God (by parable) show forth the truth and vanity, for thc scum disappears like froth cast out; while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth. Thus doth God set forth parables'** (Al-Qur'an 13: 17).

Passages with Qul

More than 200 passages in the Qur'an open with the word 'Qul' (say:), which is an instruction to the Prophet Muhammad to address the words following this introduction to his audience in a particular situation, such as e.g. in reply to a question that has been raised, or as an assertion of a matter of belief, or announcement of a legal ruling, etc.

**'Say: Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed for us: He is our Protector ...'** (Al-Qur'an 9: 51).

**'Say: O people of the book. Do ye disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in God, and the revelation that has come to us and that which has come before (us) and perhaps that most of you are rebellious and disobedient?'** (Al-Qur'an 5: 62).

**'They ask thee concerning (things taken as) spoils of war. Say: (Such) spoils are at the disposal of God and the apostle: for fear God and keep straight the relation between yourselves: obey God and His apostle, if ye do believe'** (Al-Qur'an 8: 1).

Oaths in the Qur'an

In a number of places the Qur'an employs oath-like expressions (aqsdm, sg. qasam). [For a brief discussion see also Abdullah Yusuf Ali, op. cit., App. XIV, pp. 1784-7.] Their function is to strengthen and support an argument, and to disperse doubts in the mind of the listener. In the Arabic text these passages are often opened by the word 'wa' or the phrase 'la uqsimu' (indeed I swear).

Sometimes an oath is taken by Allah himself:

**'But no, by thy Lord, they can have no real faith until they make thee judge in all disputes between them and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions but accept them with fullest conviction'** (Al-Qur'an 4: 65).

Other oaths are taken by Allah's creation:

**'By the sun and his (glorious) splendour, by the moon as she follows him, by the day as it shows up (the sun's) glory, by the night as it conceals it; by the firmament and its (wonderful) structure, by the earth and its (wide) expanse, by the soul and the proportion and order given to it ...'** (Al-Qur'an 91: 1-7).

**'I do call to witness this city ...'** (Al-Qur'an 90: 1).

Man should only take an oath bv Allah the creator. but not by anything created.

**MUHKAMAT AND MUTASHABIHAT**

The word muhkamat - (sg. muhkama) is derived from the root uhkima which means to decide between two things. It is a verbal noun in the plural, meaning judgements, decisions and in technical language refers to all clearly decided verses of the Qur'an, mostly those concerning legal rulings, but also to other clear definitions such as between truth and falsehood etc. This is what is meant by 'general muhkamat'.

Mutashabihat (sg. mutashabiha) is derived from the root 'ishtabaha' meaning 'to be doubtful'. It is a verbal noun in the plural, meaning the uncertain or doubtful things. In technical language it refers to those verses of the Qur'an the meanings of which are not clear or not completely agreed upon, but open to two or more interpretations.

Example of muhkamat:

**'O you who believe! When ye deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations, in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties ...'** (Al-Qur'an 2: 282).

Example of mutashabihat:

**'(God) Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne (of authority)'** (Al-Qur'an 20: 5).

Note that the words in brackets have been added by the translator in an attempt to interpret this aya.

The Qur'an on Muhkamat and Mutashabihat

The Qur'an says of itself that it contains two kinds of ayat, both of which are fundamental components of the book, and both of which must be accepted:

> **'He it is who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the book: others are allegorical, that is those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the book; the whole of it is from our Lord;" and none will grasp the message except men of understanding'** (Al-Qur'an 3: 7).

Here muhkamat and mutashabihat are described as follows:

muhkama:

- Something of which knowledge was desired.
- Something with only one dimension.
- Something sufflcient in meaning, requiring no further explanation.

mutashabihat:

- Something known to Allah only.
- Something with more than one dimension.
- Something requiring further explanation.

Hence in the Qur'an those ayat dealing with halal and haram, punishments, inheritance, promise and threat, etc.belong to the muhkamat, while those concerning the attributes of Allah, the true nature of the resurrection, judgement and life after death etc. belong to the mutashabihat.

General and Specific

Some verses of the Qur'an are of a very wide, general application (al-'am), e.g. including all human beings, or all Muslims etc. Other ayat are restricted in their application to certain special circumstances only (al-khas).

> **'Every soul shall have a taste of death'** (Al-Qur'an 3: 185)

> **'Let there be no obscenity, nor wickedness nor wrangling in the Hajj'** (Al-Qur'an 2:187).

> **'God (thus) directs you as regards your children (inheritance)'** (Al-Qur'an 4: 11).

Furthermore one also distinguishes between 'general verses' which remain general, and others which intend a specific meaning.

> **'Pilgrimage thereto is a duty man owes to God- those who can afford the journey'** (Al-Qur'an 3: 97).

Of the 'special meanings' there are several varieties. Usually some kind of condition or limitation is specified.

> **'Your step-daughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in'** (Al-Qur'an 4: 23).

> **'It is prescribed when death approaches any one of you, if you leave any goods that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin'** (Al-Qur'an 2: 180).

> **'So keep away from the women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean'** (Al-Qur'an 2: 222).

'Free' and 'Bound' Verses

Some of the ahkam verses are valid, 'free' (mutlaq) from any conditions or circumstances, while others are 'bound' (muqayyad) to special conditions or situations, and apply only therein.

**'If it is beyond your means, fast for three days, that is expiation for the wrath ye have sworn' (Al-Qur'an 5: 92).**

It is free, i.e. left to one's discretion whether to fast three days consecutively or with interruptions.

**'And if ye find no water then take yourselves clean sand or earth and rub therewith your faces and hands' (Al-Qur'an 5: 6).** [Some say this aya is 'bound', as the same aya mentioning wudu' instructs washing of the hands 'to the elbows'; others say it is 'free'.]

'Literal' and 'Understood' Meanings

The meaning of certain ayat is derived from the literal wording (mantdq) while that of others is derived from what is understood (mafhum) by them:

Of the literal understanding there are several kinds. The first concerns a clear text, i.e. a text clear and without ambiguity.

**'But if he cannot afford it, he should fast three days during the Hajj and seven days on his return, making ten days in all'** (Al-Qur'an 2: 196).

In other cases the text may be somewhat ambiguous in its expression but obvious as far as the meaning is concerned.

**'And do not approach them until they are clean'** (Al-Qur'an 2: 222).

The Arabic word tatahharna may refer to the end of the woman's menstrual period, or the completion of the bath after the period; the second being more obvious. [Qattan, M.: mabahith It 'ulum al-qur'an, Riyadh. 1971.]

Still other verses imply a meaning through the context, although the wording itself is not clear.

**'And out of kindness reward to them the wing of humility'** (Al-Qur'an 17: 24).

This applies to parents, and not to all human beings in general, as the context of this verse suggests.

Al Muqatta'at

The so-called 'abbreviated letters' are an important section of the mutashabihat' [Itqan, II, p.8f. A summary of the orientalists' efforts on this topic is in Jeffery. Arthur: The Mystic Letters of the Quran, MW, 14 (1924), pp. 247-60. Some of the orientalists suggested that the letters are abbreviations of the names of the various Companions who used to write the Qur'an for Muhammad. Still others say that the letters are simply symbols employed to distinguish the Sura from others before the now common names were introduced. Sura Ta Ha would be a case in point. This is also based on some Muslim scholars' views (Itqan, 11, p.10). Watt, the Edinburgh priest-orientalist, writes 'We end where we began; the letters are mysterious, and have so far baffled interpretation' (Watt, M.: Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an, Edinburgh, 1977, p.64).] in sofar as their meanings are not known. The word is derived from the root 'qata'a' - to cut, and means 'what is cut', and also 'what is abbreviated'.

In technical language the word is used for certain letters found at the beginning of several suras of the Qur'an, called 'the abbreviated letters'.

Their Occurrence

There are fourteen such letters occurring in various combinations at the beginning of 29 suras. The following is a list of their occurrence and distribution in the Qur'an:

Alif Lam Ra: 10, 11, 12, 14, 15.

Alif Lam Mim: 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32.

Alif Lam Mim Ra': 13.

Alif Lam Mim Sad: 7

Ha Mim: 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46.

Sad: 38.

Ta Sin: 27.

Ta Sin Mim: 26, 28.

Ta Ha:20.

Qaf: 50.

Kaf Ha Ya 'Ain Sad: 19.

Nun: 68.

Ya Sin: 36.

Variety of Explanations

The meaning and purpose of these letters is uncertain. There have been a variety of explanations offered by Muslim scholars throughout the ages. Among them are: [See itqan, 11, pp.9-11.]

- These letters might be abbreviations for certain sentences and words, such as e.g. Alif Lam Mim meaning Ana llahu A'lam; or Nun meaning Nur (light), etc.
- These letters are not abbreviations but symbols and names of Allah, or something else. [e .g. the letter nun standing for 'fish' . which occurs in every sura that has nun as 'abbreviated letter' in front, or ta standing for snake, as every sura with [a as abbreviated letter w in front contains the story of Musa and the snake.]
- These letters have some numerical significance, as the semitic letters also have numerical value.
- These letters were used to attract the attention of the Prophet (and later his audience) for the revelation to follow.

There are also many other explanations which cannot be referred to here. The 'abbreviated letters' are part of the Qur'anic message, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and therefore included in the text of the Qur'an. They are to be recited and read as part of the suras where they occur. They are a good example for one kind of mutashabihdt which is referred to in the Qur'an itself, (3: 7), the meaning of which is known to Allah. The Qur'an says of them: '... these are the symbols of the perspicuous book' (12: 1).

## CHAPTER 5 : Understanding the Text

### MAKKAN AND MADINAN REVELATIONS

The growth and development of the Muslim umma is marked by two great phases:

- The period in Makka, before the hijra (A.D. 622).
- The period in Madina, after the hijra.

Naturally the revelation from Allah to guide the Muslims also responded, to some extent, to these particular situations.

The Makkan Phase

The Makkan phase of the revelation lasted about 13 years, from the first revelation up to the hijra.

This phase is determined by the prime task of the Prophet to call people to Islam. The main themes of this call, based on the Qur'anic revelation are:

- Allah and His unity (Tawhid).
- The coming resurrection and judgement.
- Righteous conduct.

The role of the Prophet in this phase is in particular that of an announcer and Warner.

The Madinan Phase

The Madinan phase lasted about ten years, from the hijra to the death of the Prophet. While the basic themes of the Makkan phase remain, the factor of the Muslims' growing together into a community and the formation of the umma, now makes its presence clearly felt.

In Madina, there are four groups of people to be met:

- The muhajirun, who migrated from Makka to Madina.
- The ansar, who originated from Madina and helped the muhajirun.
- The munafiqun, who are from Madina and pretended to support the Muslims.
- The ahl al-kitab, i.e. Jews and Christians, with their respective scriptures.

In addition to these the Qur'an also continued to address al-nas, 'mankind' i.e. all people, and referred to the disbelievers and ignorant ones.

Makkan and Madinan Suras

Suras of the Qur'an have also been classified, according to their origin, into Makkan and Madinan suras.

A sura is said to be of Makkan origin, when its beginning was revealed in the Makkan phase, even if it contains verses from Madina.

A sura is said to be of Madinan origin, when its beginning was revealed in the Madinan phase, even if it has verses from the Makkan period in its text. [Mabani, in GdQ, 1, p.59.]

The following 85 suras are, according to Zarkashi, [Zarkashi, B.: Al-burhan fi 'ulum al-Qur’an, Cairo, 1958,Vol. 1,p.193.] of Makkan origin:

96, 68, 73, 74, 111, 81, 87, 92, 89, 93, 94, 103, 100, 108, 102, 107, 109, 105,113,114,112,53,80,97,91,85,95, 106,101,75, 104,77,50,90,86,54,38,7,72,36,25,35, 19,20, 56,26,27, 28, 17, 10, 11, 12, 15, 6, 37, 31, 34, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 51, 88, 18, 16, 71, 14, 21, 23, 32,

52, 67, 69, 70, 78, 79, 82, 84,

There is a difference of opinion as to what was last revealed in Makka. Some say, following Ibn 'Abbas, that it was Sura 29 (al-ankabut); others say Sura 23 (al-mu'minun); still others say Sura 83 (al-mutaffifin). Some believe that Sura 83 is actually Madinan.

The following 29 suras are, according to Zarkashi, [Zarkashi. Vol. 1, p. 194. For another list see fihrist. 1, pp. 52-3.] of Madinan origin:

2, 8, 3, 33, 60, 4, 99, 57, 47, 13, 55, 76, 65, 98, 59, 110, 24, 22, 63, 58, 49, 66, 61, 62, 64, 48, 9, 5.

Some hold that Sura 1 (al-fatiha) is of Makkan, others that it is of Madinan, origin.

The Makkan suras constitute about 11, and the Madinan about 19 juz' of the text.

From the above division it is obvious that the Madinan suras are the longer ones and comprise a much larger part of the Qur'an.

Chronology

According to a list based upon Nu'man b. Bashir and given in the fihrist of al-Nadim, [Fihrist, I. pp.49-52.] the chronological order of the revelation of the suras is as follows:

96, 68, 73, 74, 111, 81, 94, 103, 89, 93, 92, 100, 108, 102, 107, 109, 105, 112, 113, 114, 53, 80, 97, 91, 85, 95, 106, 101, 75, 104, 77, 50, 90, 55, 72, 36, 7, 25, 35, 19, 20, 56, 26, 27, 28, 17, 11, 12, 10, 15, 37, 31, 23, 34, 21, 37, 40, 41, 47, 43, 44, 45, 46, 51, 88, 18, 6, 16, 71, 14, 32, 52, 67, 69, 70, 78, 79, 82, 84, 30, 29, 83, 54, 86.

Why is it important to know the chronology of the suras and verses, although the Qur'an is not arranged in chronological order?

To know the origin and order of some of the revelation is important for understanding its meaning which can often be more easily grasped if one knows the time and circumstances that relate to it. For instance, many ayat from the Makkan period may be especially meaningful to Muslims living in a strongly un-Islamic environment, while some of the Madinan period would appeal much to Muslims who are in the process of formation of the umma. In some cases, unless one knows which of two or more related verses was revealed first, one cannot decide which legal ruling is now binding upon the Muslims. Here knowledge of the chronology is directly linked with the issue of al-nasikh wa al-mansukh. [See below for details.] It is also important to know the chronology of verses in order to understand the gradual development of many Muslim practices, attitudes and laws such as e.g. towards prohibition of alcohol, towards fighting, etc. and to see how these matters developed historically, i.e. during the lifetime of the Prophet in order to understand their full implications. [For example as far as fighting the enemy is concerned, the first verse revealed on this particular subject is from Sura al-hajj (22). This verse is from the Madinan period and it becomes clear from this that Muslims were not drawn to fight against the non-Muslims before the hijra. This has important implications for our own planning and thinking, e.g. to decide when Islam has to be defended today with verbal and when with physical means.]

Knowledge about the Makkan and Madinan suras derived from the sahaba and tabi'un and nothing is said about this by the Prophet himself. [al-Baqillani, in Qattan, op. cit., p.55.] This is because at his time everyone was a witness and well aware of the occasions of revelation.

Often there is internal evidence, as to which, part of the revelation is Makkan or Madinan. There are a number of guiding criteria, which help to distinguish between them:

- The theme. Does it belong to the Makkan or Madinan period? e.g. verses about warfare (9: 5) are only revealed after hijra.
- Sometimes there is a direct reference, such as e.g. to Abu Lahab in Sura 111, or to the Battle of Badr in Sura 3: 123.
- The length. Makkan ayat are often short, Madinan ones longer, e.g.: Sura al-shu'ara'(26) is Makkan. It has 227 ayat. Sura al-anfal (8) is Madinan. It has (only) 75 ayat.

Makkan suras are usually short, Madinan ones longer, e.g.: Juz' 30 is overwhelmingly Makkan. It has 543 (Makkan) ayat.

Juz' 18 is overwhelmingly Madinan. It has (only) 117 (Madinan) ayat.

There are however exceptions in both cases.

- The form of address. Often the address: 'O ye who believe', and 'O people of the book' indicates a Madinan origin, while the addresses 'O Mankind' and 'O People' are usually of Makkan origin.
- The theme. Among the Makkan themes are tawhid, shirk, day of resurrection, moral corruption, stories of the Prophets. These topics are also found in Madinan suras, but usually only touched upon briefly. Madinan themes which are not found in Makkan revelations are of social and legal implications, concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, punishment, etc.
- There are 19 suras with so-called huruf tahajji (such as alif , lam , mim , etc . ) . All these suras are Makkan, except Sura al-baqara (2) and Al 'Imran (3).
- All ayat with the word kalla are Makkan.
- All suras containing sajda are Makkan.
- Most of the suras of the group mufassal, beginning with Sura qaf (50) in the latter part of the Qur'an are Makkan .
- All references to the munafiqun are from Madina (except Sura al-'ankabut (29). Its verse 11 is Makkan.

Summary

The knowledge of Makkan and Madinan revelations is one of the important branches of ''ulum al-Qur’an. It is not merely of historical interest, but particularly important for the understanding and interpretation of the respective verses.

Many suras of the Qur'an do contain material from both periods of revelation, and in some cases there exists difference of opinion among scholars concerning the classification of a particular passage. However, on the whole, it is a well-established distinction, fully employed in the science of tafsir and best derived from the internal evidence of the text of the Qur'an itself.

**ASBAB AL-NUZUL**

The Qur'an has been revealed for guidance, for all times and situations to come. However, various ayat were revealed at a particular time in history and in particular circumstances. The Arabic word sabab (pl. asbab) means reason, cause and 'marifa asbab al-nuzul' is the knowledge about the reasons of the revelations, i.e. the knowledge about the particular events and circumstances in history that are related to the revelation of particular passages from the Qur'an.

Its Importance

Wahidi (d. 468/1075), one of the best classical scholars in this field wrote: 'The knowledge about Tafsir of the ayat is not possible without occupying oneself with their stories and explanation of (the reasons) for their revelation.' [Asbab al-nuzul, by al-Wahidi al-Nisaburi. Cairo, 1968, p 4]

Knowledge about the asbab al-nuzul helps one to understand the circumstances in which a particular revelation occurred, which sheds light on its implications and gives guidance to the explanation (tafsir) and application of the aya in question for other situations.

In particular, knowledge about the asbab al-nuzul helps one to understand:

- The direct and immediate meaning and implication of an aya, as it can be seen within its original context.
- The imminent reason underlying a legal ruling.
- The original intent of the aya.
- Whether the meaning of an aya is specific or of general application, and if so, under which circumstances it is to be applied.

- The historical situation at the time of the Prophet and the development of the early Muslim community.

Example:

'To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the presence of God, for God is all-pervading, all-knowing' (2:115).

Without knowing the sabab (reason), one might easily conclude that this revelation permits the Muslim to face any direction when performing prayer, while it is well known that to face Qiblah is one of the conditions without which prayer becomes invalid. The circumstances in which this revelation occurred explains its implications:

According to Wahidi [op. cit. pp. 20-21] a group of Muslims traveled on a dark night and they did not know where the qibla was, so they later realized that they had prayed in the wrong direction. They asked the Prophet about it and he kept silent until the above verse was revealed. '

[Based on a report from Jabir b. 'Abdullah. Wahidi also informs us about some other situations when the aya reportedly applied:
- That one may pray voluntary prayer on one's riding camel, in whichever direction it may turn (based on Ibn 'Umar).
- That the Companions of the Prophet asked why they were ordered to pray for the dead Negus of Abyssinia, who had prayed towards a different qibla than their own (based on Ibn 'Abbas and 'Ata').
- That the Jews asked, why the qibla of the Muslims had been changed from bait al-maqdis (based on Ibn Abi Talha).

See Wahidi, op.cit., p.21. All this supports the view (to which in particular K. Murad drew my attention) of Suyuti based on Zarkashi (Suyuti, Lubab an nuzul, Tunis, 1981, p.7.) that when the suhaba of the Prophet spoke about an aya of the Qur'an, saying 'It was revealed concerning ...'(nazalat fi kadha) they do not restrict themselves to narrating a single 'cause' for the revelation of an aya but rather refer to the 'situations' to which particular verses where found applicable during the lifetime of the Prophet while the occasion of the first revelation of the aya may have been much earlier. In this lie great avenues for understanding and tafsir of the Qur'anic message.]

Taking into account this reason for the revelation one cannot come to the wrong conclusion that it is unimportant where to turn in prayer. The scholars say however that this verse excuses the mistake of those who un-willingly and under adverse circumstances fail to observe the correct qibla.

How it is Known

The well-known asbab al-nuzul have been related to us by the reliable Companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Only reports which are sahih can be considered fully reliable, as is the case in the science of hadith generally. A particular condition here is also that the person who relates it should have been present at the time and occasion of the event (the revelation). [Wahidi. p.4.] Reports from tab'iun only, not going back to the Prophet and his Companions are to be considered weak (da'if). Hence one cannot accept the mere opinion of writers or people that such and such verse might have been revealed on such and such occasion. Rather one needs to know exactly who related this incident, whether he himself was present, and who transmitted it to us.

Kinds of Reports

There are two kinds of reports on asbab al-nuzul:

- Definite reports.
- Probable reports.

In the first kind (definite) the narrator clearly indicates that the event he relates is the sabab al-nuzul.

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: the verse **'Obey Allah and obey the apostle and those of you (Muslims) who are in authority ...'** (4: 59) was revealed in connection with 'Abdullah bin Hudafa bin Qais bin 'Adi when the Prophet appointed him as the commander of a sariyya (army detachment). [Bukhari, VI, No. 108.]

In the second kind (probable) the narrator does not indicate clearly that the event narrated is the sabab al-nuzul, but suggests this probability.

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> Narrated 'Urwa: Az-Zubair quarreled with a man from the Ansar because of a natural mountainous stream at Al-Harra. The Prophet said: O Zubair, irrigate (your land) and then let the water flow to your neighbor. The Ansar said: O Allah's apostle (this is because) he is your cousin? At that the Prophet's face became red (with anger) and he said: O Zubair. Irrigate (your land) and then withhold the water till it fills the land up to the walls and then let if flow to your neighbor. So the Prophet enabled Az-Zubair to take his full right after the Ansari provoked his anger.

The Prophet had previously given an order that was in favour of both of them. Az-Zubair said: 'I don't think but this verse was revealed in this connection: But no, by your Lord, they can have no faith, until they make you judge in all disputes between them' (4: 65). [Bukhari, VI, No. 109.]

Kinds of Reasons

There are three kinds of 'reasons' which are connected with revelation of particular passages from the Qur'an:

- Revelation in response to an event or a general situation.
- Revelation in response to a particular question that has been asked by someone.
- Revelation for other reasons, known or not known to us.

Response to an Event

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet went out towards Al-Batha' and ascended the mountain and shouted: 'O Sabahah', so the Quraish people gathered around him. He said: 'Do you see? If I tell you that an enemy is going to attack you in the morning or in the evening, will you believe me?' They replied: 'Yes'. He said- 'Then I am a plain Warner to you of a coming severe punishment'. Abu Lahab said: 'Is it for this reason that you have gathered us? May you perish!' Then Allah revealed **'Perish the hands of Abu Lahab'** (Sura 111: verse 1). [Bukhari, VI, No. 496.]

The Sura concerning Abu Lahab was revealed in response to this event, when Abu Lahab said: 'May you perish!'

Response to a Particular Situation

Sura 2:158 concerning Safa and Marwa was revealed in response to a particular situation in Makka during the time of the Prophet.

> Narrated 'Urwa: I asked 'A'isha (regarding the Sa'i between As-Safa and Al-Marwa). She said: 'Out of reverence to the idol Manat which was placed in Al-Mushallal those who used to assume Ihram in its name, used not to perform Sa'i between As-Safa and Al-Marwa (because there were two other idols between these two hills). So Allah revealed: **Verily As.-Safa and Al-Marwa are among the symbols of Allah.**' Thereupon Allah's apostle and the Muslims used to perform Sa'i (between them). Sufyan said: The (idol) Manat was at Al-Mushallal in Qudaid. 'A'isha added: 'The verse was revealed in connection with the Ansar. They and (the tribe of) Ghassan used to assume Ihram in the name of Manat before they embraced Islam'. 'A'isha added 'There were men from the Ansar who used to assume Ihram in the name of Manat which was an idol between Makka and Medina. They said, O Allah's Apostle! We used not to perform the Tawaf (sa'i) between As-Safa and Al-Marwa out of reverence to Manat. ' [Bukhari, VI, No. 384; also Nos. 22. 23.]

In response to this situation 2: 158 was revealed.

Question to the Prophet

On many occasions the Muslims addressed questions to the Prophet concerning Islamic beliefs and the Islamic way of life. An example of the many occasions when a revelation was revealed in response to such a question posed to the Prophet is Sura 4:11

> Narrated Jabir: The Prophet and Abu Bakr came on foot to pay me a visit (during my illness) at Banu Salama's (dwellings). The Prophet found me unconscious, so he asked for water and performed the ablution from it and sprinkled some water over me. I came to my senses and said O Allah's apostle! What do you order me to do as regards my wealth? So there was revealed **'Allah commands you as regards your children's (inheritance)'** (4: 11). [Bukhari, VI, No. 101.]

The verse in question is concerned with inheritance and explains the rules of inheritance for children as follows:

> **God (thus) directs you as regards your children's (inheritance): 'To the male a portion equal to that of two females: if only daughters, two or more, their share is two-thirds of the inheritance. If only one, her share is half ...'** (4:11).

Question by the Prophet

On other occasions, the Prophet himself asked questions. Sura 19: 64 was revealed in response to such a question by the Prophet Muhammad:

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet said to the Angel Gabriel, What prevents you from visiting us more often than you visit us now? So there was revealed: **'And we (angels) descend not but by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs what is before us and what is behind us ...'** (19: 64).' [Bukhari, VI, No. 255.]

Response to a General Question

There are numerous occasions when revelation was sent down providing guidance concerning general questions that had arisen in the Muslim community.

> Thabit narrated from Anas: Among the Jews, when a woman menstruated, they did not dine with her, nor did they live with them in their houses; so the Companions of the apostle (may peace be upon him) asked the apostle (may peace be upon him) and Allah the Exalted revealed: **'And they ask you about menstruation: say it is a pollution, so keep away from women during menstruation' to the end** (Qur'an 2: 222). The messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Do everything except intercourse ... [Muslim, I. No. 592.]

This report is also a good example of how the Prophet himself explained the meanings of the revelation when such questions arose.

Particular Persons

Often a general rule which became part of the Qur'anic revelation, was first revealed in response to the circumstances or needs of a particular person, e.g. Sura 2:196:

> **'... And if any of you is ill, or has an ailment in his scalp (necessitating shaving) he should in compensation either fast or feed the poor or offer sacrifice ...'** Ka'b bin 'Ujra said this verse - and if one of you is ill or has an ailment in his scalp, - was revealed concerning me. I had lice on my head and I mentioned this to the Prophet and he said: Shave (your head) and compensate by fasting three days or a sacrifice or feed six poor, for each poor one Sa'. [Muslim, II, Nos. 2735, 2738, 2739; Wahidi, op.cit., p.31. One sa' is a cubic measure of approx. 2.6 kg.]

This is again an example of the Prophet himself explaining the revelation in detail. At other times such revelation could not be applied but to the respective person. The best example of such a revelation is Sura Lahab (111) already referred to above. Other examples are references to the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an, such as e.g. Sura 75: 16:

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas (as regards Allah's statement) **'Move not your tongue concerning (the Qur'an) to make haste therewith'** (75:16). When the Angel Gabriel revealed the divine inspiration to Allah's Apostle he moved his tongue and lips, and that stage used to be very hard for him, and that movement indicated that revelation was taking place. So Allah revealed in Sura al-qiyama which begins: **'I do swear by the Day of Resurrection ...'** The Verses: **'Move not your tongue concerning (the Qur'an) to make haste therewith. It is for us to collect it (Qur'an) in your mind and give you the ability to recite it by heart'** (75:16-17). [Bukhari. VI. No. 451.]

Several Asbab and One Revelation

From the reports of the sahaba it appears that particular passages of the Qur'an were revealed in response to more than one event, situation or question, or that the application of a particular passage of the Qur'an was for more than one particular occasion, as pointed out above.

Examples:

Sura al-ikhlas (112) firstly responds to the mushrikun in Makka before the hijra, and secondly to the ahl al-kitab encountered in Madina after the hijra. [Itqan, I, p.35; Wahidi, op.cit., pp.262-3.]

Another example is Sura 9: 113:

> This aya was revealed firstly in connection with the death of the Prophet's uncle Abu Talib, where Muhammad said 'I will keep on asking (Allah for) forgiveness for you unless I am forbidden to do so'. Then there was revealed: **it is not fitting for the Prophet and those who believe that they should pray for forgiveness for pagans, even though they be of kin, after it has become clear to them that they are the companions of the Fire.** [Bukhari, VI, No. 197.]

The other occasion reported is when the Companions and in particular 'Umar b. al-Khattab found the Prophet shedding tears when he visited the graveyard. The Prophet explained that he had visited his mother's grave and that he had asked his Lord's permission to visit it which had been granted to him and that he had also asked his Lord's permission to pray for her forgiveness which had not been granted to him and the above aya had been revealed. [Wahidi, op. cit., p. 152.]

Several Revelations and One Sabab

A well-known example for several revelations, which are connected with one particular circumstance, are three verses which according to reliable reports, came down in response to the question of Umm Salama, whether or why only the men had been referred to in the Qur'an, as being rewarded. According to Al-Hakim and Tirmidhi the verses 3:195, 4: 32 and 33:35 were revealed in response to this question:

> **'And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another: those who have left their homes, or have been driven out therefrom, or suffered harm in My cause, or fought or been slain - verily I will blot out from them their iniquities and admit them into gardens with rivers flowing beneath; a reward from the presence of God and from His presence is the best of rewards'** (3: 195).
>
> **'And in no wise covet those things in which God has bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others; to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn: but ask God of His bounty for God has full knowledge of all things'** (4: 32).
>
> **'For Muslim men and women - for believing men and women - for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise - for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward'** (33:35). [Salih, op cit., p. 148]

Several Views on Sabab al-Nuzul

It also occurs that the Companions of the Prophet when mentioning a revelation, differed in their views about its sabab al-nuzul. This is due to the fact that as already shown above there have been various asbab for one particular revelation, and each of the persons reporting the circumstances had been present only on one of the various occasions.

Otherwise several views about the same revelation have to be judged on their merits according to the rules of 'ulum al-,hadith, and one of them will be found to be stronger than the others.

There are two reports concerning the revelation of Sura 17: 85:

> According to Ibn 'Abbas, as reported in Tirmidhi, the Quraish asked the Jews to give them something they could ask the Prophet about and they were advised to ask about the Spirit (al-ruh). Then the aya 17:85 was revealed.
>
> From Ibn Mas'ud, as reported in Bukhari, it is related that he said: While I was in the company of the Prophet on a farm, and he was reclining on a palm leaf stalk, some Jews passed by. Some of them said to the others: Ask him about the Spirit. Some of them said: What urges you to ask him about it. Others said: (Don't) lest he should give you a reply which you dislike, but they said, Ask him. So they asked him about the Spirit. The Prophet kept quiet and did not give them any answer. I knew that he was being divinely inspired so I stayed at my place. When the divine inspiration had been revealed, the Prophet said

> **'They ask you (O Muhammad) concerning the Spirit. Say: "the Spirit", its knowledge is with my Lord and from the knowledge it is only a little that has been given to you (mankind)'** (17: 85).

The second report, although the first one has been declared sahih by Tirmidhi, is considered to be stronger because it comes from Ibn Mas'ud, who says that he was present on the occasion of the revelation, while the report from Ibn 'Abbas in Tirmidhi does not contain this information. [See Salih, op.cit., pp. 145-6; Bukhari, VI, No. 245.]

Specific or General?

Another question leads directly to the field of tafsir, but is still connected with asbab al-nuzul. When one knows about the sabab al-nuzul, it is still to be decided whether the revelation has a specific implication for the particular occasion it was connected with, or whether it is of general implication and needs to be applied by all Muslims at all times.

> **'As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from God, for their crime: and God is exalted in power'** (5: 41).

This verse although it was revealed concerning a specific person who had stolen a piece of armor and had been punished accordingly, is of general application. [See Wahidi, op.cit., p.111; also Tafsir Ibn al-Jauzi, Beirut, 1964, Vol.II, p.348.]

What is not Asbab al-Nuzul

In some cases scholars have provided us with the background of certain events that have been narrated in the Qur'an. Obviously, however, such information does not belong to the field of asbab al-nuzul. Although it may help to understand the message of the revelation, it is not related in a direct and reliable way, showing immediate reason for or the occasion of the revelation.

> **'Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?'** (105:1).

The following passage from a book of tafsir, although it contains information about the background of the event narrated in the sura, does not belong to the field of asbab al-nuzul:

> (The companions of the elephant) had come from the Yemen and wanted to destroy the Ka'ba (they were) from Abyssinia and their leader was Abraha al-Ashram, the Abyssinian. [Tujibi, mukhtasar min tafsir al-Tabari, Cairo, 1970, II, p.529.]

Summary

The branch of 'ulum al-Qur’an concerned with the asbab al-nuzul is one of the most important areas of knowledge for the proper understanding and explanation of the Qur'anic revelation. The message of the Qur'an is guidance for all times. However its ayat were revealed at particular points of time in history and in particular circumstances.

One of the most crucial steps in meaningful interpretation is to distinguish between that part which is attached solely to the historical event and that part, which, although attached to the historical event, also has wider implications. The knowledge of asbab al-nuzul helps to distinguish between these two by:

- Clarifying the events and circumstances, which are connected with the revelation of certain ayat.
- Illustrating the application of such ayat by referring to situations, when the Companions of the Prophet found them proper and applicable.

**AL-NASIKH WA AL-MANSUKH**

The revelations from Allah as found in the Qur'an touch on a variety of subjects, among them beliefs, history, tales of the prophets, day of judgement, Paradise and Hell, and many others. Particularly important are the ahkam (legal rulings), because they prescribe the manner of legal relationships between people, as Allah wishes them to be observed.

While the basic message of Islam remains always the same, the legal rulings have varied throughout the ages, and many prophets before Muhammad brought particular codes of law (shari'a) for their respective communities.

The Arabic words 'nasikh' and 'mansukh' are both derived from the same root word 'nasakha' which carries meanings such as 'to abolish, to replace, to withdraw, to abrogate'.

The word nasikh (an active participle) means 'the abrogating', while mansukh (passive) means 'the abrogated'. In technical language these terms refer to certain parts of the Qur'anic revelation, which have been 'abrogated' by others. Naturally the abrogated passage is the one called 'mansukh' while the abrogating one is called 'nasikh'.

The Qur'an on Naskh

The principle of naskh (abrogation) is referred to in the Qur'an itself and is not a later historical development:

'None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause it to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: knowest thou that God has power over all things?' (2: 106). [Some however say that this refers to the revelations before the Qur'an, which have now been substituted by the Qur'an itself. See Mawdudi. The Meaning of the Qur'an, Lahore, 1967, Vol. I, p.102. note 109.]

How it came about

When the message of Islam was presented to the Arabs as something new, and different from their way of life, it was introduced in stages. The Qur'an brought important changes gradually, to allow the people to adjust to the new prescriptions.

Example: There are three verses in the Qur'an concerning the drinking of wine. Wine drinking was very widespread in pre-Islamic times and, although a social evil, highly esteemed. The three verses which finally led to the prohibition of intoxicating substances were revealed in stages (4: 43, 2: 219; 5: 93-4).

Why it is important

Knowledge of al-nasikh wa al-mansukh is important because it concerns the correct and exact application of the laws of Allah. It is specifically concerned with legal revelations:

- It is one of the important pre-conditions for explanation (tafsir) of the Qur'an.
- It is one of the important pre-conditions for understanding and application of the Islamic law (hukm, shari'a).
- It sheds light on the historical development of the Islamic legal code.
- It helps to understand the immediate meaning of the ayat concerned.

Tafsir (explanation of the Qur'an) or legal ruling is not acceptable from a person who does not have such knowledge.

How do we know it?

As in the field of asbab al-nuzul, the information about al-nasikh wa al-mansukh cannot be accepted upon mere personal opinion, guesswork or hearsay, but must be based on reliable reports, according to the ulum al-hadith, and should go back to the Prophet and his Companions.

The report must also clearly state which part of the revelation is nasikh and which is mansukh.

Some scholars say that there are three ways of knowing about al-nasikh wa al-mansukh:

- Report from the Prophet or Companions.
- Ijma' (consensus of the umma upon what is nasikh and what mansukh).
- Knowledge about which part of the Qur'an preceded another part in the history of revelation. [Qattan, op.cit., p. 199]

Example:

Narrated Mujahid (regarding the verse):

> **Those of you who die and leave wives behind, they (their wives) shall await (as regards their marriage) for four months and ten days** (2: 234).

The widow, according to this verse, was to spend this period of waiting with her husband's family, so Allah revealed: Those of you who die and leave wives (i.e. widows) should bequeath for their wives, a year's maintenance and residence without turning them out, but if they leave (their residence) there is no blame on you for what they do with themselves, provided it is honourable (i.e. Lawful marriage) (2: 240).

So Allah entitled the widow to be bequeathed extra maintenance for seven months and 20 nights and that is the completion of one year. If she wished, she could stay (in her husband's home) according to the will, and she could leave it if she wished, as Allah says: Without turning them out, but if they leave (the residence) there is no blame on you.

So the idea (i.e. four months and ten days) is obligatory for her.

'Ata' said: Ibn 'Abbas said: This verse i.e. the statement of Allah ... without turning one out ... cancelled the obligation of staying for the waiting period in her late husband's house, and she can complete this period wherever she likes.

'Ata' said: If she wished, she could complete her 'idda by staying in her late husband's residence according to the will or leave it according to Allah's statement:

'There is no blame on you for what they do with themselves.'

'Ata' added: Later the regulations of inheritance came and abrogated the order of the dwelling of the widow (in her dead husband's house) so she could complete the 'idda wherever she likes. And it was no longer necessary to provide her with a residence.

Ibn Abbas said: This verse abrogated her (i.e. the widow's) dwelling in her dead husband's house and she could complete the 'idda (i.e. four months and ten days) (wherever she liked, as Allah's statement says: ...'without turning them out ...' [Bukhari, VI, No. 54.]

This report explains clearly which part of the revelation is nasikh and which is mansukh. Mujahid was one of the well-known tab'iun and Ibn 'Abbas was a Companion of the Prophet.

What is Abrogated?

According to some scholars the Qur'an abrogates only the Qur'an. They base their view on suras 2: 106 and 16: 101. According to them the Qur'an does not abrogate the sunna nor does the sunna abrogate the Qur'an. This is, in particular, the view held by Shafi'i. [For details see Kitab al-risala, Cairo, n.d., pp.30-73; English translation by M. Khadduri, op.cit., pp. 12345; for a brief summary of Ash-Shafi'i's views see also Seeman, K., Ash-Shafi'is Risala, Lahore, 1961, pp.53-85.]

Others are of the opinion that the Qur'an may abrogate the Qur'an as well as the sunna. They base their view on Sura 53: 34.

There is also the view that there are four classes of naskh:

- Qur'an abrogates Qur'an.
- Qur'an abrogates sunna.
- Sunna abrogates Qur'an.
- Sunna abrogates sunna.

[Qattan, op.cit, pp. 201-2.]

In this discussion, we shall only consider the abrogation in the Qur'an, and leave aside the abrogation in the sunna.

Three Kinds of Naskh in the Qur'an [Ibn Salama, al-nasikh wa al-mansukh, Cairo, 1966, p.5.]

The scholars have divided abrogation into three kinds:

- Abrogation of the recited (verse) together with the legal ruling.
- Abrogation of the legal ruling without the recited (verse).

- Abrogation of the recited (verse) without the legal ruling.

For abrogation of the recited (verse) together with its legal ruling:

> 'A'isha (Allah be pleased with her) reported that it had been revealed in the Holy Qur'an that ten clear sucklings make the marriage unlawful, then it was abrogated (and substituted) by five sucklings and Allah's apostle (may peace be upon him) died and it was before that time (found) in the Holy Qur'an (and recited by the Muslims). [34 Muslim, II, No. 3421.]

For abrogation of a legal ruling without the recited (verse):

> **'O Prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives to whom thou has paid their dowers; and those whom thy right hand possesses out of the prisoners of war whom God has assigned to thee; and daughters of thy paternal uncles and aunts and daughters of thy maternal uncles and aunts, who migrated (from Makka) with thee; and any believing woman who dedicates her soul to the Prophet if the Prophet wishes to wed her; - this only for thee and not for the believers (at large);We know what we have appointed for them as to their wives and the captives whom their right hands possess; - in order that there should be no difficulty for thee and God is oft-forgiving, most merciful'** (33: 50).
>
> **'It is not lawful for thee (to marry more) women after this, nor to change them for (other) wives, even though their beauty attract thee, except any thy right hand should possess (as handmaidens); and God doth watch over all things'** (33: 52).

This is one of the few very clear examples of naskh, though only concerning the Prophet specifically, since for Muslims in general the number of wives has been restricted to four. (Sura 4:3).

For abrogation of the recited (verse) without the legal ruling:

> 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas reported that 'Umar bin Khattab sat on the pulpit of Allah's messenger (may peace be upon him) and said: Verily Allah sent Muhammad (may peace be upon him) with truth and he sent down the book upon him, and the verse of stoning was included in what was sent down to him. We recited it, retained it in our memory and understood it. Allah's messenger (may peace be upon him) awarded the punishment of stoning to death (to the married adulterer and adulteress) and after him, we also awarded the punishment of stoning. I am afraid that with the lapse of time, the people (may forget it) and may say: We do not find the punishment of stoning in the book of Allah, and thus go astray by abandoning this duty prescribed by Allah. Stoning is a duty laid down in Allah's book for married men and women who commit adultery when proof is established, or if there is pregnancy or a confession. [Muslim, III, No. 4194; Bukhari, VIII, No. 816.]

The punishment of stoning for adultery by married people has been retained in the sunna, while it is not included in the Qur'an .

The Abrogated Verses

There are, according to Ibn Salama, [Op cit., see pp.6-8 for the names of these suras.] a well-known author on the subject:

- 43 suras with neither nasikh or mansukh.
- 6 suras with nasikh but no mansukh.
- 40 suras with mansukh but no nasikh.
- 25 suras with both nasikh and mansukh.

According to Suyuti's Itqan there are 21 instances in the Qur'an, where a revelation has been abrogated by another.

He also indicates that there is a difference of opinion about some of these: e.g. 4: 8, 24: 58, etc. [Itqan, II, pp.20-3; Kamal, op.cit., pp.101-9 also gives Suyuti's complete list.]

Some scholars have attempted to reduce the number of abrogations in the Qur'an even further, by explaining the

relationships between the verses in some special ways, e.g. by pointing out that no legal abrogation is involved, or that for certain reasons the naskh is not genuine

Shah Waliullah (d. 1759) the great Muslim scholar from India only retained the following 5 out of Suyuti's 21 cases as genuine:

> Mansukh 2: 180 nasikh 4: 11, 12
>
> Mansukh 2:240 nasikh 2: 234.
>
> Mansukh 8:65 nasikh 8: 62.
>
> Mansukh 30:50 nasikh 33: 52.
>
> Mansukh 58: 12 nasikh 58: 13.

A case listed by Suyuti, which has no direct legal implication is the following:

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: When the verse: **'If there are 20 amongst you, patient and persevering, they will overcome two hundred'**, was revealed, it became hard on the Muslims, when it became compulsory that one Muslim ought not to flee before 10 (non-Muslims) so Allah lightened the order by revealing: **'but now Allah has lightened your (task) for He knows that there is weakness in you. But (even so) if there are 100 amongst you who are patient and persevering, they will overcome 200 (non-Muslims)'** (8: 66). So when Allah reduced the number of enemies that Muslims should withstand, their patience and perseverence against the enemy decreased as much as their task was lightened for them. [Bukhari, VI, No.176.]

Still others hold that there are no genuine (sahih) reports available on this issue, going back to the Prophet, while those going back to the Companions contradict each other. [Ali, M.M.: The Religion of Islam, Lahore, 1936, p.32. It may be pointed out that Ali's treatment of the subject is not very thorough. Of the three examp1es he cites in support of his opinion ('in most cases, where a report is traceable to one Companion who held a certain verse to have been abrogated, there is another report traceable to another Companion, through the fact that the verse was not abrogated' - p. 33) two are definitely not in his favour, while the third can be easily explained. His first case concerns Sura 2:180 (inheritance). It has certainly been superseded by other verses, e.g. 4:7-9 and that is probably all that is meant, when saying it is mansukh Ali's second case, '2:184, is considered by Ibn 'Umar as having been abrogated while Ibn 'Abbas says it was not' . See below, where I have quoted this very hadith from Ibn 'Abbas (Bukhari, VI, No.32) where Ibn 'Abbas himself explains why he does not hold it as abrogated. The third case is, like the first one, definitely not in support of Ali: '2: 240 was abrogated according to Ibn Zubair, while Mujahid says it was not'. This is wrong, see Sahih Bukhari, VI, Nos. 53 and 54, where both Ibn Zubair and Mujahid hold the verse to be abrogated. Furthermore both Ibn Zubair and Mujahid are tabi'un, and not Companions (sahaba).]

Therefore to them the issue of nasikh wa al mansukh is perhaps not of great importance. However, it is clear from the Qur'an itself, (e.g. in the case of inheritance, 2: 180; 4: 7-9, etc.) that abrogation occurred occasionally. Hence it is wrong to completely ignore the subject.

Abrogation and Specification

There is of course a difference between abrogation and specification. By the latter is meant that one revelation explains in more detail or according to specific circumstances how another revelation should be understood.

Example: Sura 2:183 says **'O you who believe, fasting is prescribed to you ...'**

Narrated 'Ata' that he heard Ibn 'Abbas reciting the Divine verse **'for those who can do it is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent'** (2:184). Ibn 'Abbas said 'This verse is not abrogated but it is meant for old men and old women who have no strength to fast, so they should feed one poor person for each day of fasting (instead of fasting). [Bukhari, VI, No. 32.]

It is quite clear that the second verse (2:184) does not abrogate the rule of fasting from the first verse (2:183) but explains that in a specific case, that of feeble old people, there is a way of making up for the loss of fast.

In the same way the verses concerning intoxicating drinks can be understood as specifications rather than abrogations (see 4:43;2:219;5:93-4).

Summary

The Qur'an, in 2:106, refers to the concept of naskh. However, there is a difference of opinion about the extent to which al-nasikh wa-al mansukh does in fact occur in the text of the Qur'an. The information concerning al-nasikh wa-al mansukh must be treated with great caution as, for all reports concerning the text of the Qur'an, two independent witnesses are required. Many of the examples which the scholars have drawn upon to illustrate this question (and I have quoted them for the same purpose) are based on one witness only. 'A'isha alone reported that 10 or 5 sucklings had been part of the Qur'anic recitation, and only 'Umar reported that the 'verse of stoning' had been included in the Qur'anic text. These legal rulings are not included in the Qur'an precisely because they were not considered reliable, being based on one witness only. Similarly, other examples about naskh, based on the words of Ibn 'Abbas or Mujahid alone, are to be judged by the same measure.

However, as mentioned there remain a small number of verses which, as far as can be ascertained from the internal evidence of the Qur'an, have been superseded by other verses in the Qur'an.

**VARIETY OF MODES**

What is the meaning of al-ahruf al-sab'a?

The word sab'a means seven, and ahruf is the plural form of harf, which has many meanings, among them 'edge' border, letter, word', etc. In technical language it describes the variety of modes of the Qur'an transmitted to us, also expressed in various forms of writing the text.

Example:

Read the two versions of Sura 2:9 given on plates 7 and 8. Disregard the difference in style of writing. The first example is from a Qur'an from North Africa, the second from a Qur'an from Jordan. In the North African version, the word 'yukhadi'una' (they deceive) is used twice, while in the Jordan version, the word occurs as 'yakhda'una' in the second instant. Both are correct and accepted readings, since they have been transmitted to us. Also there is no objection from the viewpoint of grammar or correct language and the writing without vowel signs can carry both readings.

The Language of the Quraish

In the time of the Prophet Muhammad when the Qur'an was revealed, the Arab tribes scattered all over the peninsula, spoke a number of dialects, each containing peculiar words and idioms.

The language of the Quraish had developed into a form of 'high Arabic' due to the many influences it absorbed, being spoken at the main centre of trade and pilgrimage in Arabia. Hence this language was obviously the most suitable to carry the messages of revelation which were to reach all peoples and not be restricted to a particular tribe.

The Seven Modes

The hadith reports tell us that the Qur'an was actually revealed in seven modes (al-ahruf al-sab'a). This has been narrated by more than ten of the Prophet's Companions, among them Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn 'Abbas and others. [Itqan, I, p. 41.]

The following is the hadith in Bukhari:

> 'Narrated 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas: Allah's apostle said: Gabriel recited the Qur'an to me in one way. Then I requested him (to read it in another way), and continued asking him to recite it in other ways, and he recited it in several ways till he ultimately recited it in seven different ways'. [Bukhari, VI No. 513.]

On another occasion, 'Umar complained to the Prophet that Hisham had recited Sura al-furqan in a way different from what 'Umar had heard from the Prophet, but the Prophet said: '... this Qur'an has been revealed to be recited in seven different ways, so recite of it whichever is easier for you'. [Bukhari, VI No. 514.]

Salman is reported to have said that he read a passage from 5:82 in the presence of the Prophet in the following two versions, the first of which is now in the Qur'anic text, while the second constitutes a variant reading according to 'Ubay b. Ka'b: [Ibn Abi Dawud., p. 129.]

- dhalika bi-anna minhum qissisina wa ruhbana.

- dhalika bi-anna minhum siddiqina wa ruhbana. [Ibn Abi Dawud., p. 103.]

Muslim scholars have put forward a number of explanations and benefits for the Muslim umma deriving from the revelation of the Qur'anic message in several modes. Among these the following are most important:

- To make the reading, pronunciation and memorization more easy, as many people were illiterate in the Prophet's time.
- To unite the new Muslim community on the basis of one common language, the Arabic of the Quraish, with minor variations accepted, according to spoken language.
- To show something of the unique nature of the Qur'an, in the realm of language.
- To show something of the unique nature of the Qur'an, in the realm of meaning and legal rulings.
- To explain a legal ruling in more detail.

Scholars Differ

There is a difference of opinion among classical Muslim scholars on the subject of the 'seven modes', to the extent that one of them was able to say: 'the degree of difference of opinion (ikhtilaf) among the scholars is to the extent of 35 sayings'. [Itqan, I, p.45.]

Some of these different opinions are that the 'seven modes' are:

- Different languages (dialects) current among the Arabs at the time of revelation, such as e.g. Quraish, Hudhail, Tamim, etc., who had different ways of pronunciations which could even affect the spelling, e.g.
- al-tabuh and al-tabut. (2: 248) [See Kamal, op. cit., p.46.]
- or: hiyaka for iyaka (1:5).
- or: atta for hatta (12: 35).
- It may also be the usage of words from the different languages in the Qur'an (this is considered one of the most sound views).
- Usage of synonyms in the Qur'an, i.e. that a variety of expressions describe one and the same concept. A well-known example is Sura 101: 5, which reads as 'Ka-l-'ihni-l-manfush', but in another version 'Ka-s-sufi-l-manfush' both meaning 'like carded wool'. The word arshidna was read in place of ihdina (Sura 1: 6), etc. [Both examples from Ibn Mas'ud. This view is also very close to the Idea of various dialects. and many scholars tend to accept such usage of synonyms, as meaning the seven modes'.]
- Different aspects of the revelation, such as e.g. order, prohibitions, promise, narrations, etc.
- Seven differences, such as possible ways of reading words and structures in the Qur'an, e.g. the word 'trusts' in 23: 8 which can be read both 'trust' (sg.) or 'trusts' (pl.) according to the plain text without vowels: li-amanatihim or li-amanatihim .
- Slightly different wordings of a particular passage, such as e.g. in 9: 100: 'Gardens under which rivers flow' which some read as 'Gardens from under which rivers flow', adding the word 'from' (min) to the text.
- Different ways of pronunciation as they have been explained in great detail by the scholars of qira'a (recitation) such as e.g. imala, idgham, etc. [This view has also been favoured by many, because it does not cause much controversy.]

However, even non-Muslim orientalists concede that 'no major differences of doctrines can be constructed on the basis of the parallel readings based on the 'Uthmanic consonantal outline, yet ascribed to mushafs other than his. All the rival readings unquestionably represent one and the same text. They are substantially agreed in what they transmit ... [Burton, J,: The Collection of the Qur’an, Cambridge. 1977, p. 171.]

Summary

From these different opinions, of which only some have been listed above, by way of illustration, a generally-accepted conclusion is that the 'seven modes' are at the basis of several distinct ways of reciting the Qur'an, reflecting the different usage at the time of revelation, comprising variations in pronunciation and even minor differences in wording. The 'seven 'ahruf are however, not identical with the well-known 'seven readings'. These came about in a later age. Although much of what the 'seven readings' contain is also found in the seven ahruf, there are some differences, which will be explained when discussing the seven readings.

Only a few examples for 'ahruf have been transmitted to us. They are of importance for Tafsir, rather than qira'a.

Seven Modes in the Qur'an

While some scholars [e.g. Tabari, Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ayat al-Qur'an, Cairo, 1968. See introduction to this tafsir. Zarkashi, Vol. 1, p.213 says most scholars are of the first view, and that the last double-reading of the Qur'an by Muhammad in the presence of the Angel Gabriel served, among others, the purpose of eliminating the other six modes.] hold that the written Qur'an now includes only one of the 'seven modes', and the others are transmitted orally to us, there is some evidence also for the view that the text of the Qur'an, as we have it in front of us, may include all these 'seven modes' because:

- No one would change the Qur'an.
- The present text was written upon the basis of the sahaba testimonies, both orally and written, going back directly to the Prophet.
- The Qur'an is protected by Allah.

**THE VARIOUS READINGS**

Al-qira'a (pl. qiraa'at) is derived from the word qara'a, 'reading, reciting'; from which also the word Qur'an is derived. It is a verbal noun, meaning recitation. In technical language it describes the oral recitation of the Qur'an as well as the punctuation of the written text, which corresponds to the oral recitation.

Examples:

Mawdudi [Introduction to the Study of the Qur'an, Delhi, 1971, p.21.] has very convincingly explained the proper understanding of some accepted difference in reading. He wrote that in al-fatiha (1: 3): the readings "**maliki**" and " **mâliki** " both describe one of the attributes of Allah, and there is absolutely no contradiction between **'sovereign'** and **'master'** of the day of judgement, but 'these two readings make the meaning of the verse all the more clear'.

Similarly 5:8 **arjulakum** [Reading of Nafi, Hafs 'an Asim, Kisa'i.] and **arjulikum** [Reading of Ibn Kathir, Abu Amr, Abu Bakra 'an 'Asim, Hamza.] carry two meanings: "**Wash**" or "**Wipe**" your feet

Both are indeed correct, for under normal circumstances a man will wash his feet, while some other person e.g. a traveler may wipe them. Here the text of the Qur'an carries both meanings at the same time. This is indeed a unique feature of the revelation from Allah.

Readers among the Sababa

Reading and reciting of the Qur'an has been done since revelation began, and the Prophet was the first to recite. This has already been discussed in the section on transmission of the text. After his death, the recitation continued through his Companions. Among the famous readers from whom many of the tabi'un learned, were Ubay bin Ka'b, 'Ali, Zaid bin Tbabit, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari and many others.

Later Development

Later on, with Muslims settling in many parts of the world, the Qur'an was recited in a variety of ways, some of which were not in accordance with the accepted text and the transmitted readings from the Prophet and the Companions. This necessitated a thorough screening and distinction between what is sahih (sound) and what is shadh (exceptional).

The Seven Readings

The 'seven readings' were standardised in the second/eighth century. Ibn Mujahid, a ninth-century Muslim scholar, wrote a book entitled The Seven Readings, in which he selected seven of the prevailing modes of recitation as the best transmitted and most reliable. Others were subsequently disfavoured and even opposed, among them the readings of Ibn Mas'ud and 'Ubay bin Ka'b. However, this is not to say that one must restrict oneself to one of these seven readings, or to all of them. Below are listed the local origin of the seven readings and the names of readers [For their short biographies see Fihrist ,I, p. 63ff.] and some transmitters (rawis) connected with them:

| Place | Reader | Transmitter |
|---|---|---|
| Madina | Nafi' (169/785) | Warsh (197/812) |
| Makka | Ibn Kathir (120/737) | |
| Damascus | Ibn 'Amir (118/736) | |
| Basra | Abu 'Amr (148/770) | |
| Kufa | 'Asim (127/744) | Hafs (180/796) |
| Kufa | Hamza (156/772) | |
| Kufa | Al-Kisa'i (189/804) | Duri (246/860) |

Readings No. 1 and 5 are of particular importance: the reading transmitted by Warsh is widespread in Africa, except Egypt, where, as now in almost all other parts of the Muslim world, the reading transmitted by Hafs is observed.

Other Views

Later on other views emerged, making ten or fourteen well-known readings. In addition to the seven above, the following make up the ten and the fourteen readers:

| Place | Reader | Transmitter |
|---|---|---|
| Madina | Abu Ja'far (130/747) | |
| Basra | Ya'qub (205/820) | |
| Kufa | Khalaf (229/843) | |
| Basra | Hasan al Basri (110/728) | |
| Makka | Ibn Muhaisin (123/740) | |
| Basra | Yahya al-Yazidi (202/817) | |
| Kufa | al-A'mash (148/765) | |

The readings are also divided as follows: [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p 77]

- The mutawatir (transmitted by many; they include the seven well-known readings).
- The ahad (transmitted by one; they number three, going back to the sahaba and together with the seven make up the ten).
- The shadh (exceptional; they go back to the tabi'un only).

Muslim scholars have laid down three criteria for the acceptance of any qira'a and three criteria for preferring some over others. The best transmission was of course mutawatir. The three criteria for acceptance of other readings are:

- Correctness according to Arabic grammar.
- Agreement with the written text of 'Uthman.
- Traced back reliably to the Prophet.

The three criteria for preference are:

- Correctness according to Arabic grammar.
- Agreement with the written text of 'Uthman.
- Reported/preferred by many (majority).

## Summary

The best summary on this topic is perhaps contained in the words of the scholar Abu-l-Khair bin al-Jazari (d.833/1429), who wrote:

'Every reading in accordance with Arabic (grammar) even if (only) in some way, and in accordance with one of the masahif of 'Uthman, even if (only) probable, and with sound chain of transmission, is a correct (sahih) reading, which must not be rejected, and may not be denied, but it belongs to the seven modes (ahruf) according to which the Qur'an was revealed, and the people are obliged to accept it, no matter whether it is from the seven Imams, or the ten or from other accepted Imams, but when one of these three conditions is not fulfilled, it must be rejected as weak (daif) or exceptional (shadh) or void (batil), no matter whether it is from the seven or from one who is older than them.' [Suyuti, Itqan, I, p.75 ]

## CHAPTER 6 : Interpreting the Text

### TAFSIR, ITS KINDS AND PRINCIPLES

Tafsir (exegesis) of the Qur'an is the most important science for Muslims. All matters concerning the Islamic way of life are connected to it in one sense or another since the right application of Islam is based on proper understanding of the guidance from Allah. Without tafsir there would be no right understanding of various passages of the Qur'an.

Tafsir and Ta'wil

The word tafsir is derived from the root 'fassara' – to explain, to expound. It means 'explanation' or 'interpretation'. In technical language the word tafsir is used for explanation, interpretation and commentary on the Qur'an, comprising all ways of obtaining knowledge, which contributes to the proper understanding of it, explains its meanings and clarifies its legal implications. [See Zarkashi, op.cit., 1, p. 13.] The word mufassir (pl. mufassirun) is the term used for the person doing the tafsir, i.e. the 'exegete' or 'commentator'.

The word ta'wil, which is also used in this connection, is derived from the root 'awwala' and also means 'explanation, interpretation' .

In technical language it similarly refers to explanation and interpretation of the Qur'an.

Tafsir in the language of the scholars means explanation and clarification. It aims at knowledge and understanding concerning the book of Allah, to explain its meanings, extract its legal rulings and grasp its underlying reasons. Tafsir explains the 'outer' (zahir) meanings of the Qur'an. Ta'wil is considered by some to mean the explanation of the inner and concealed meanings of the Qur'an, as far as a knowledgeable person can have access to them. Others are of the opinion that there is no difference between Tafsir and ta'wil.

Why is it Important?

There are a number of reasons why Tafsir is of great importance, but the basic reason is the following: Allah has sent the Qur'an as a book of guidance to mankind. Man's purpose is to worship Allah, i.e. to seek His pleasure by living the way of life Allah has invited him to adopt. He can do so within the framework of the guidance that Allah has revealed concerning this, but he can do so only if he properly understands its meanings and implications.

A Warning

Some Muslim scholars have warned against Tafsir. Ahmad b. Hanbal, e.g. has said: 'Three matters have no basis: Tafsir, malahim (tales of eschatological nature) and maghazi (tales of the battles)'. [Ibn Taimiya, muqaddima fi usul al-tafsir, Kuwait, 1971, p.59.]

By this is meant that there is much exaggeration and unsound material in these fields, but it does not mean that neither of them ought to be considered. This is clear from another version of the same verdict, in which the word isnad is used for 'basis'.

Basic Conditions

Muslim scholars have laid down certain basic conditions for sound Tafsir. Any Tafsir, which disregards these principles must be viewed with great caution, if not rejected altogether. The most important among these conditions are the following:

The mufassir must:

- Be sound in belief ('aqida).
- Well-grounded in the knowledge of Arabic and its rules as a language.
- Well-grounded in other sciences that are connected with the study of the Qur'an (e.g. 'ilm al-riwaya).
- Have the ability for precise comprehension.
- Abstain from the use of mere opinion.

- Begin the Tafsir of the Qur'an with the Qur'an.
- Seek guidance from the words and explanations of the Prophet.
- Refer to the reports from the sahaba.
- Consider the reports from the tabi'un.
- Consult the opinions of other eminent scholars.

Grades of Sources [See Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., p.93.]

The best Tafsir is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an.

The next best is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet Muhammad, who, as Shafi'i explained, acted according to what he understood from the Qur'an.

If nothing can be found in the Qur'an nor in the sunna of the Prophet, one turns to the reports from the sahaba. [See Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., p.95.]

If nothing can be found in the Qur'an, the sunna and the reports from the sahaba, one turns to the reports from the tabi'un. [See Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., p. 102.]

However, nothing can match the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet.

Kinds of Tafsir

Tafsir may be divided into three basic groups: [This classification has been borrowed from Sabuni, tibyan, p.63. See also Qattan, op.cit. section 25.]

- Tafsir bi-l-riwaya (by transmission), also known as Tafsir bi-l-ma'thur.
- Tafsir bi'l-ra'y (by sound opinion; also known as tafsir bi-l-diraya, by knowledge).
- Tafsir bi-l-ishara (by indication, from signs).

Tafsir bi-l-riwaya

By this is meant all explanations of the Qur'an which can be traced back through a chain of transmission to a sound source, i.e.:

- The Qur'an itself.
- The explanation of the Prophet.
- The explanation by Companions of the Prophet (to some extent).

Naturally, the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet are the two highest sources for tafsir, which cannot be matched nor superseded by any other source. Next to these rank the explanations by the sahaba, since the sahaba were witnesses to the revelations, were educated and trained by the Prophet himself and were closest to the period of the first Muslim umma. Of course all reports of explanations by the Prophet or by a sahabi must be sound according to the science of riwaya as in 'ulum al-hadith.

The Qur'an explained by the Qur'an

The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an is the highest source of tafsir. Many of the questions which may arise out of a certain passage of the Qur'an have their explanation in other parts of the very same book, and often there is no need to turn to any sources other than the word of Allah, which in itself contains tafsir. To seek to explain an aya from the Qur'an by referring to another aya from the Qur'an is the first and foremost duty of the mufassir. Only if this does not suffice, he will refer to other sources of tafsir. [Itqan, 11, pp.181-2.]

A case in point is the detailed explanation of 5:2 by 5:4, concerning permissible and prohibited meat. Another example of explanation of one aya in the Qur'an by another concerns a question which might arise from Surah 44: 3. It is explained in Surah 97: 1:

**'We sent it down during a blessed night'** (44: 3).

Which night is this blessed night, in which the Qur'an was sent down?

**'We have indeed revealed this in the lailat al-qadr'** (97: 1).

A third example is the explanation of Surah 2:37 by Surah 7:23:

**'Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned towards him, for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful'** (2: 37).

These 'words of inspiration' are explained by the Qur'an as follows:

**'Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls. If Thou forgive us not, and bestow not upon us Thy mercy, we shall certainly be lost'** (7: 23).

The Qur'an explained by the Prophet

There are numerous examples of explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet, who either himself asked the Angel Gabriel for explanation of matters not clear to him, or who was asked by the Companions about the Qur'an. Suyuti has given a long list of explanations of the Qur'an by the Prophet sura by sura. [Itqan, 11, pp. 191-205.]

Here one example may suffice:

**'And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread. . .'** (2: 187).

Narrated 'Adi b. Hatim: I said: 'O Allah's Apostle! What is the meaning of the white thread distinct from the black thread? Are these two threads?' He said: 'You are not intelligent, if you watch the two threads'. He then added, 'No, it is the darkness of the night and the whiteness of the day'. [Itqan 11. pp. 191-205.]

Tafsir by sahaba

[For a brief summary on early Tafsir see al-Sawwaf, 'Early Tafsir', in Ahmad, K. and Z. 1. Ansari. Islamic Perspectives. Leicester, 1979, pp.l35-45.]

Next, after explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and of the Qur'an by the Prophet himself, ranks the explanation of the Qur'an by the sahaba. Among them, the following were best known for their knowledge of and contribution to the field of tafsir: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'All (not much has been reported from them), Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn 'Abbas, 'Ubay b. Ka'b, Zaid b. Thabit, Abu Musa al-Ash'arl, 'Abdullah b. Zubair.

Ibn 'Abbas

Abdullah b. 'Abbas (d. 68/687) is considered to be the most knowledgeable of the Companions in tafsir. [A book entitled tanwir al-miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas (Beirut, n.d.) is a complete tafsir of the Qur'an. all explanations of which are said to go back to Ibn 'Abbas. On the question of authenticity, see al-Sawwaf, op.cit. p. 140.] He has been called 'tarjuman al-qur'an', the interpreter of the Qur'an. Since he was related to the Prophet, being his cousin, and his maternal aunt Maimuna being one of the Prophet's wives, he was very close to the Prophet Muhammad and learnt much about the revelation. It is said that he saw the Angel Gabriel twice. Apart from his detailed knowledge of everything concerning tafsir, he is also given the credit for having emphasised one of the basic principles of 'ilm al-tafsir which has remained important to this day, namely, that the meaning of words, especially of unusual words in the Qur'an ought to be traced back to their usage in the language of pre-Islamic poetry. There is a long list of such explanations quoted by Suyutl. [Itqan 1 pp.120-33.]

The following is an example of tafsir from a sahabl, namely Ibn 'Abbas, confirmed by 'Umar:

**'So celebrate the praises of your Lord, and ask for His forgiveness. Verily! He is the one who accepts the repentance and forgives'** (110: 3).

> Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: 'Umar used to make me sit with the elderly men who had fought in the battle of Badr. Some of them felt it (did not like that) and said to 'Umar: 'Why do you bring in this boy to sit with us, while we have sons like him?' 'Umar replied 'Because of what you know of his position' (i.e. his religious knowledge). One day 'Umar called me and made me sit in the gathering of those people, and I think that he called me just to show them (my religious knowledge). 'Umar then asked them in my presence: 'What do you say about the interpretation of the statement of Allah'. **'When comes help of Allah, and the conquest . . .'** (110: 1). Some of them said: 'We are ordered to praise Allah and ask for His forgiveness, when Allah's help and the conquest (of Makka) comes to us'. Some others kept quiet and did not say anything. On that 'Umar asked me: 'Do you say the same, O Ibn 'Abbas?' I replied: 'No'. He said: 'What do you say then?' I replied: 'That is the sign of the death of Allah's apostle which Allah informed him of. Allah said: **'(O Muhammad) when comes the help of Allah (to you against your enemies) and the conquest (of Makka) (which is the sign of your death) - you should celebrate the praises of your Lord and ask for His forgiveness, and He is the One who accepts the repentance and forgives'** (110:1-3). On that 'Umar said: 'I do not know anything about it other than what you have said'. [Bukhari, Vl, No. 494.]

Another short example is:

> Narrated 'Ata': When Ibn 'Abbas heard: **'Have you not seen those who have changed the favor of Allah into disbelief?'** (14: 28). He said: 'Those were the disbelieving pagans of Makka. [Bukhari Vl No. 222.]

Tafsir by Tabi'un

There are many more persons from among the tabi'un known for their preoccupation with tafsir, because many more people had embraced Islam and the need for knowledge about the Qur'an had increased manifold. Also, the Prophet himself and many of his Companions were no longer available to give this guidance, and therefore greater efforts had to be made to satisfy this need for proper understanding of the book of Allah.

Of the mufassirun from among the tabi'un one distinguishes three groups, according to their origin and area of activity:

- Those from Makka.
- Those from Madina.
- Those from Iraq.

The Makkan Group

According to many scholars, this group of mufassirun from among the tabi'un are the most knowledgeable in tafsir, because they learnt about it from 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas. They are many in number, and among the best known out of many others are Mujahid (d.104/722), 'Ata' (d.114/732) and 'Ikrima (d.107H).

Mujahid, the best known among them, is reported to have gone through the Qur'an thrice with Ibn 'Abbas and to have asked him about the 'when' and 'how' of each verse that had been revealed. [Taimiya p. ;102.]

A complete book of tafsir by Mujahid has been published. It is based on a manuscript from the 6th Hijra century and is edited by Surti. [Surti, A.: Tafsir Mujdhid, 2 vols., Beirut, n.d.]

Example:

Humaid b. Qais Makki reported: I was with Mujahid and we were circumambulating the house (Ka'ba). A man came and asked whether the fasts of penalty of an oath should be observed continuously or severally. Humaid replied that if he liked he could observe them severally too! But Mujahid said: Not severally, for the reading of 'Ubayy b. Ka'b is thalathi ayyamin mutatabi'at, i.e. to fast three days continuously'. [Muwatta Malik, No. 617.]

The Madinan Group

The mufassirun among the tabi'un from Madina had many Companions as their teachers, among the best known being 'Ubay b. Ka'b. The following are some of the well-known Qur'an exegetes among them: Muh. Ammad b. Ka'b al-Qarzi (d.117/735), Abu-l 'Alliya al-Riyahl (d.90/708) and Zaid b. Aslam (d.130/747).

The Iraq Group

There were also many mufassirun among the tabi'un in Iraq. Their principal teacher was Ibn Mas'ud. Their main centres were Basra and Kufa. The best known among them are: Al-Hasan al-Basri (d.121/738), Masruq b. al-'Ajda' (d.63/682) and Ibrahlm al-Nakha'i. (d.95/713).

Summary

Nothing can excel the tafsir of the Qur'an by the Qur'an. This is followed by sound reports about the Prophet's explanation of the revelation.

Whatever is sound and genuine in the explanation of the Qur'an by the sahaba and the tabi'un may not be rejected, but the following principles are to be observed:

- Sound reports must be distinguished from unsound ones, for many views have been falsely attributed to some sahaba and tabi'un (especially to Ibn 'Abbas and Mujahid, the most renowned ones among them), which cannot be traced back to them when the isnad is investigated. Those reports must of course be rejected.
- Material from the ahl-al-kitab, in particular the Jewish traditions (isra'iliyat) [For details, see below, p. 133.] must be sorted out and evaluated.
- Material which crept in due to theological, philosophical, political and other considerations, must be sorted out and evaluated (such as e.g. some Shi'a attributions to 'Ali, or 'Abbasid attributions to Ibn 'Abbas, etc.).
- False material purposely introduced by the enemies of Islam must be distinguished from sound material.

Tafsir bi'l-ra'y

The second kind of tafsir, after tafsir bi'l-riwaya, is the so-called tafsir bi'l-ra'y. It is not based directly on transmission of knowledge by the predecessors, but on the use of reason and ijtihad.

Tafsir bi'l-ra'y does not mean 'interpretation by mere opinion', but deriving an opinion through ijtihad based on sound sources. While the former has been condemned already in the hadith, the latter is recommendable, when used in its proper place as sound ijtihad, and was also approved by the Prophet, e.g. when he sent Mu'adh bin Jabal to Yemen. [Mishkat al-masabih, op.cit., II, p.794: (Arabic), Vol. 2, No. 3737.]

Tafsir bi'l-ra'y on the other hand has been declared haram on the basis of the following hadith:

> 'From Ibn 'Abbas: Allah's messenger said: "He who says (something) concerning the Qur'an without knowledge, he has taken his seat of fire" '. [Ibn Taimiya, p.105, from Tirmidhi, who says it is hasan sahlh.]

However this hadith has been explained in two ways:

- That no one should say of the Qur'an what is not from the sahaba or tabi'un.
- That no one should say of the Qur'an what he knows to be otherwise. [Sabuni.tibyan,p.174.]

The obvious meaning of the hadith is that one should not say something about the Qur'an without having the proper knowledge, the sources of which have already been explained. [The Qur'an explained by the Qur'an, by the Prophet, by the Companions. By the tabi'un. by sound ijtihad.